THROUGH THE SHADOWS

CYRIL ALINGTON

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THROUGH THE SHADOWS

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THE MACMILLAN CO. OF CANADA, LTD.
TORONTO

THROUGH THE SHADOWS

BY

CYRIL ALINGTON

New York
THE MACMILLAN COMPANY
1922
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Set up and electrotyped. Published May, 1922.
Third Printing July, 1922

CONDE NAST PRESS, GREENWICH, CONN.

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TO
THE TRIO WHICH BECAME A QUARTETTE

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PREFACE

"Oh, I only said that to cheer you up," said the unabashed Michael. "Nothing like a little judicious levity."—*The Wrong Box.*

"I didn't say there was nothing *better*," the king replied; "I said there was nothing *like* it."—*Alice through the Looking-Glass.*

To those who accept the doctrine embodied in the above quotations it will, I hope, be needless to apologise for the existence of this book; those who do not accept it would be mollified by no apologies that I can offer.

C. A. A.

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CHAPTER I

THE BARONET'S MOVE

De l'audace, de l'audace. . . .—Danton.

Sir Richard Atherton laid down the letter which he had been reading with a prolonged sigh of satisfaction and helped himself liberally to marmalade. "That's all right: they're coming on Monday," he observed to Captain England who, having already finished his breakfast, was deep in an arm-chair engaged in a study of the *Times*. The gallant Captain grunted as his only reply.

His host gazed at him, or at so much of him as was at the moment visible. There was a look in his eye which the Captain, if less occupied, would have recognised as dangerous; there was something furtive in the appraising glance; something ruthless in the decisive nod which marked a purpose formed.

But let us deal frankly with the reader. Sir Richard, though a baronet, could not fairly be described as a typical baronet of fiction. Bold he was, and his service with the Hussars in Mesopotamia had given reasonable proofs of the fact, but bad not even the most exacting of his instructors at Eton had ever called him. His mother had died when he was a child, and his father's death during the war had caused him to leave the Army after the Armistice and establish himself in the family place in Shropshire where, as he described it, he "ploughed the fields and scattered" with considerable zest, though it is possible that the latter part of his labours had the greater attraction for him.

But it is not to be denied that on this particular morning there was an air of cunning in his eye which boded ill for his unconscious victim. Captain England continued to read the paper with the gloomy air of a sportsman in late August, when cricket had ceased to be interesting, and the student is fobbed off with the inglorious annals of lady players of croquet and boy players of lawn tennis.

"Any news, old chap?" inquired the baronet, with a courtesy too marked not to be disingenuous.

The Captain grunted again. "Usual sort of rot," he answered gloomily; "one silly old ass writes to say his son's twice the man he was since he took to playing golf; another silly old ass has started to run to Birmingham and back: and that's what we pay threepence for!"

"Silly old idiots!" responded his host. "Kent done anything?" he added after a moment, in the hope of finding a more cheerful topic.

"Rained all day: just like their luck!" growled the Captain.

"Rotten!" agreed the sycophantic baronet: and he resumed the perusal of his letters.

Captain England and he had been at Eton together, where they had been united, among other things, by a common taste for private theatricals. England, whose gloomy countenance had at once earned for him the name of "Smiler," had been the star performer of his tutor's troupe, and it was on record that he had beguiled one wet afternoon by visiting the school in the character of a Swedish professor. The adventure had led to a quarter of an hour's fearful joy during an interview with the Librarian, who had been

somewhat puzzled to reconcile his visitor's zeal for information in the abstract with his obvious desire to bring the conversation to a close. Since leaving Eton he had served in the Army, and fate had brought the two friends together again in Mesopotamia, before England was taken prisoner by the Turks. Two years' imprisonment had not lessened the gloom of his appearance nor increased his chances of employment, so that when Atherton invited him to come and help him in his new duties, as secretary and general adviser, he had been glad to agree. "I've studied up the part all right," Sir Richard had written, "and I think I can do it; but what I want is a chap to manage the entrances and exits and get the chorus off the stage and all that. I'm sure you're just the man for it." So far the duties had been light: England had developed a talent for conciliating tenants and a surprising knowledge of fat cattle. He had also accomplished the more difficult feat of persuading the local Constitutional Union that Sir Richard's brand of Conservatism was precisely that which the county was most likely to appreciate if, as seemed likely, the sitting member should decide to retire. It was in his politi-

cal capacity that he roused himself to exclaim, "By Jove, the old brute's done it!"

"Got to Birmingham, do you mean?" inquired Sir Richard, who had failed to follow his train of thought.

"No, old Jenkinson has resigned. Listen to this: 'Mr. Thomas Jenkinson, M. P., has resigned his seat for the Drayworth Division of Shropshire. It is understood that the Coalitionists propose to invite Sir Richard Atherton, Bart., M. C., to contest the seat.' Just our luck! You'll have to be stumping the country, old man, instead of blazing at the partridges and philandering with the fair Miss—— Here, steady on!" The sentence broke off as a well-aimed scone struck the reader on the chest.

"Don't be a silly idiot!" said his host coldly. "Does it say anything else?"

"I was just going to tell you if you hadn't been in such a hurry, and now you'll have to wait till I've cleaned this butter off my waistcoat. Now, let me see—here we are. 'Sir Richard, who served with distinction in the war, is well known for his interest in agricultural problems, and is understood to advocate drastic economies in Government expenditure. The other parties have not

as yet selected a candidate, but the spendthrifts of the Coalition are not in any case likely to find much support in this or any other constituency.' You'll be in for an Anti-Waste campaign, old chap, and that means a rare lot of talking. It's a baddish look-out for your house party."

The candidate-designate betrayed no signs of elation.

"Oh, confound it all," he said, "they'll have to wait a week or so. Sign of respect to the late member and all that! I'm not going to spoil everything just for *them*. You must see them, Tommy, and talk to them like a mother."

"Oh, all right," said his friend, "I'll see what I can do. I daresay I could keep your end up for you: you won't want me here. Let me see: how would it read in the papers?

" 'Sir Richard, who has only recently succeeded to a considerable estate, feels that his first duty is to his tenants. The first week of September is a time when every landlord should be among his own people. During his temporary absence his agent, Captain England, who has appeared on many platforms both in Europe and Asia, has taken charge of his electoral interests. Those who

are familiar with the two gentlemen are agreed that the constituency stands to gain by the exchange.' That's the line, I think!"

But the baronet showed no signs of responding to his friend's humour.

"I do wish you'd be serious for a minute, Smiler; it's not nearly so simple as you think. Here, read that," and he threw over a letter.

The Captain perused it. "Well, what's the matter?" he asked.

"Have you read it?" inquired Sir Richard.

"Yes, it's not very obscure:

DEAR SIR RICHARD—My daughter and I are glad to accept your very kind invitation for August 31st. I shall much look forward to meeting your sister, Mrs. Howard, for though we have never met, I think we must have common friends in Norfolk. It will be a special pleasure also to have the chance of a talk with Professor Lapski after our interesting conversation of last week. My daughter joins in kind regards. Yours sincerely,

PAULINE BRANSON.

Well, what's the matter with that? She's coming and the fair Diana is coming: what more do you want? Who's this professor she seems so keen about?"

Sir Richard had finished his breakfast and was lighting a cigarette. He felt a certain embarrassment, and his brief experience of the stage had shown him the value of that resource.

"Well, you see," he answered, "Mrs. Branson is fearfully keen on thought-reading and spiritualism and all that, and I know she thinks I'm a fearful fool, and so, just to keep my end up, I pitched her no end of a yarn about this fellow Lapski and all he'd done. She swallowed it down like anything, and then I got a bit carried away with my subject, and I was awfully keen to get them here, and so I said if she'd come I'd ask him to meet her and—well, there you are, you see!"

"Well, what about it?" asked Captain England. "Won't he come?"

The baronet approached his friend and laid a hand sympathetically on his shoulder. "My dear old chap," he said, "there are times when your slowness positively makes me weep. There's no such chap as Lapski in the wide world, or at least, if there is, I don't know where to find him. 'You can search me,' as Ella Wheeler Wilcox or one of those high-souled American writers said in a moment of exaltation!"

The Captain whistled. "I see," he said. "Well, all you can do is to tell them he's prevented at the last moment: sudden illness of Mrs. Lapski—I suppose you told her he was married? Or he might be elected President of somewhere. Did you tell her he was a Pole or a Yugo-Slav or what?"

But Sir Richard was in no mood for badinage.

"Of course I thought of all that," he answered, "but there's no doubt she'll be awfully disappointed. She's quite likely to cut up rough and make inquiries, and then the whole thing will come out and a pretty sort of fool I shall look. No, old chap, I've thought it all out, and sorry as I am to have to say it, there's only one thing for it, and that's for *you* to be Lapski."

The Captain uttered a shout of protest, but Sir Richard, now warming to his idea, waved his opposition aside and went on. "Yes, I've thought the whole thing out. It was last night it occurred to me. 'It can be done,' I said to myself, 'and England must do it,' like that old Johnny in the National Gallery or somewhere who couldn't find the North Pole or something. You know, old man, you're rather a dab at thought-reading.

You've told me a lot of yarns you played off on those old Turks, and I'll tell you a lot about every one in the house; and with a pair of spectacles and a wig—why, for a clever chap like you it's as easy as backgammon! I know you won't go back on a friend, old man." (At this point Sir Richard's manner became almost emotional—a fact which did the more credit to his histrionic powers as Captain England remained notably unimpressed.) "And now you know why, when I heard you talk about those speeches you'd go and make I just felt I couldn't bear it. 'What are two or three speeches on political platforms to saving a friend's honour?' I said to myself, 'What is politics compared to affection?' Or look at it another way. Here are you offering to represent me before a lot of yokels who don't know the difference between Northcliffe and Southdown, and what am I offering you in exchange? Why, a position of European importance! the chance of being one of the world's great pioneers! (I tell you I pitched it in uncommon hot to the old lady.) The more I think of it, Smiler, old fellow," he went on, ringing the bell as he spoke, "the clearer I am that I should be wrong to stand between

you and a really good opportunity. No, I won't hear a word!" as Captain England endeavoured to make himself heard, "I know your self-denying nature. You'll have the time of your life—artistic instinct long suppressed, and all that, finding a fair field at last! Wilson," as the butler appeared, "will you please have Captain England's things packed at once? he will be going away for a week."

"Yes, Sir Richard. A telegram just come for you, sir!" Sir Richard read it and threw it over to Captain England.

"What a nuisance! Alice can't come: one of her boys has got measles."

"But if Mrs. Howard can't come to act as hostess," said the Captain with a gleam of hope lighting up his gloomy features, "the whole thing will have to be off. You can't have a lot of ladies in a bachelor establishment like this. I may not be going away after all, Wilson," he added, turning to the butler.

Sir Richard's countenance had for the moment fallen, but his brow cleared, and turning to the butler with the air of a Napoleon rising to meet a crisis he said, "Get on to 1785 Gerrard, please."

The telephone was just outside the door

of the breakfast room, and the presence of Wilson acted as a bar to further intimate conversation.

Silence fell upon the two friends: Captain England gazed gloomily out of the window or made desperate efforts to read the financial pages of the *Times*, while his host walked up and down, whistling gently to himself, with an occasional chuckle as though his thoughts were not unpleasant. It was Captain England who broke the silence by growling out, "By the way, who are coming to this party of yours supposing it does come off?"

Sir Richard was all geniality. "That's right, old chap," he said, "I'm so glad you're beginning to sit up and take notice again. For a thought-reader there's nothing like studying up your audience a bit beforehand. Well, there's Uncle Bob: Aunt Elizabeth can't come, and I don't think he's broken-hearted. She's got a religious craze on just now and is always running about to some new kind of service: rather rough on my old uncle, who only wants to be left in peace. 'The godly and decent order of the Church of England' is quite good enough for him. Then there's one of the Ranby twins: you don't know them, do you? Anyhow, I bet

you wouldn't know them apart! And old Montford, who used to be a beak at Eton: he's an Archdeacon now and a topping good shot. He always was a pretty good shot with a book," he went on, chuckling. "Do you remember his dropping one on your head when you were asleep in five-o'clock school at the far end of the room?"

The Captain chuckled, and encouraged by this sign of appreciation, Sir Richard continued: "Then there's his daughter. I've an idea Ranby is rather sweet on her, but I'm not sure: anyhow I haven't told him she's coming, so there'll be no harm done. I just remember her when I was a boy: haven't seen her since. That's about all, I think—of course there *was* Alice, but now she's off. —Well, what luck?" he broke off as Wilson reappeared.

"You're through, sir," said Wilson, and Sir Richard went to the telephone.

It is never pleasant to listen to the half of a conversation, and Captain England made desperate efforts to divert his mind; but the rain of the day before had sadly abbreviated the cricket news, and neither the rights of Silesia nor the wrongs of Ireland made a sufficiently intimate appeal. The thought

of his own future in the rôle of a thought-reader of uncertain nationality, the impending sacrifice of his moustache (for the artist in him had realised its inevitable doom even while he was fighting against his fate)—all these things conspired to depress him, and his depression was increased by the idiotic snatches of conversation which reached him from time to time.

"Well, that is perfectly splendid of you—What?—No, they won't have the least idea—What?" (a prolonged pause). "No, did she though? My word! I wonder what she'll say to my uncle! he's one himself, you know.—What?—yes, perhaps.—Well, thanks awfully—au revoir!"

The telephone was hung up and Sir Richard re-entered briskly. It was no longer the young Napoleon stung with the splendour of a sudden thought, but the conqueror entering in triumph with fresh laurels on his brow.

"She'll do it," he said. "That girl's a topper!"

"I wonder if you mean that you've found some one to take the part of Madame Lapski," said the Captain nervously, "because, if so, I'm bound to say there are limits——"

"Oh no, old chap, I don't even believe there *is* one. Now I think of it, I'm pretty sure that I said he'd had most interesting talks with her spirit. I must try and remember. No, this is Mary Summers, my cousin, you know; I've asked her if she'll come down and be hostess, and she says she will."

"But she's not married, is she? No, of course she can't be, and that won't make things any better."

"Well, you see," said Sir Richard a little guiltily, and yet with an air of conscious pride, "I've asked her if she'd come and *be* Alice, just for a bit, you know."

"*Be* Alice!" exclaimed the Captain; "what do you mean?"

"Well, you see, Mrs. Branson's never seen Alice: you saw she said so in that letter, so she'd never know. And after all they're just about the same age, and she's always been like a sister to me, and all that. Besides, they aren't so awfully unlike, after all."

"But my dear Dick, the thing's absurd. Why, all the servants will know her and give the thing away."

"I don't believe they will—except Wilson, and he's all right: let's ask him. Wilson," he went on to the butler, who had reappeared

to clear away the breakfast, "how long is it since Miss Alice was here? some time, isn't it?"

"Yes, Sir Richard; in fact I hardly think she's been here since she was married. You see, what with the war and this house being shut up and used as a hospital and what not I couldn't really say she's been here since then, sir."

"Then I suppose none of the servants have ever seen her?"

"No, sir, no, I should say not: you see, sir, in these days, what with coming and going, there's never been what you might call any servants of any standing."

"There, Tommy, what did I tell you? I do hope that'll be a lesson to you not to be always making difficulties. By the way, Wilson, Miss Alice is coming here next week: you'll find her a bit altered, I expect. Joy and sorrow, you know, Wilson, they change us all; but you're a married man yourself and you understand what I mean. You'd better not say anything about it perhaps: it's rather a delicate business—but there, you understand!"

"I fancy I do, sir," said the faithful Wilson. He glanced at Captain England with

the ghost of a smile on his lips, but the expression of intensified gloom on the face of that hardened soldier froze it into nothing, and he resumed his task at the breakfast table.

"Well, well, now that's settled, let's come out and smoke on the terrace," said Sir Richard.

Captain England followed him through the French window: he was meditating deeply, and to judge by the muttered words that escaped him his meditations were anything but pleasant. His host smoked cheerfully, glancing at him now and then with ill-concealed amusement.

"By the way," said Captain England suddenly, "what was that about your uncle? When you were telephoning, I mean, there seemed to be some difficulty about him—not that a difficulty more or less matters in this infernal folly!"

"Oh that!" answered Sir Richard airily; "well, he's a brewer, you see."

"And why shouldn't he be?"

"Well, it so happens Mrs. Branson is a pussyfoot: I didn't quite know how bad it was, but Mary tells me there was rather a nasty scene at the Winterbottoms the other night when she went for a harmless old

beggar who was a brewer and cursed him up and down. Jolly lucky I heard about it. I don't want to have her making things nasty for poor old Uncle Bob."

"Well, what are you going to do about it?" asked England sarcastically; "tell him to say he's Carpentier, I suppose?"

Sir Richard's serenity was unimpaired. "Well, as you ask me," said he, "I was thinking of asking him to say he was a retired Indian Civilian. She can't have any objection to them."

"And what about *his* objections?" asked the destined impersonator of the Professor of thought-reading; "does it ever occur to you that people mayn't like being made fools of just to please you? How do you suppose *I* like it? And now the whole blessed house is going to be full of people who aren't what they pretend to be! You'll get into trouble, young man, and so I tell you, and if it gets out that you're conducting a performing circus like this you can whistle for your seat in Parliament!"

Sir Richard was unmoved by this outburst. He whistled an air from *Pinafore* which the exasperated ear of his friend identified as being "Things are seldom what they seem."

and it was with an almost paternal kindliness that he addressed his assailant.

"My dear old chap," he said, "I do wish you wouldn't try and look on the dark side of things: it's not right, you know, it's not right! Old Pocock said so last week at that bazaar when there wasn't any milk for the tea and the dog had eaten all the cake, and I did think it was so wise of him. Here am I working my heart out for you and what do I get for it? Do try and just look at it like a reasonable man. You're to be a thought-reader, aren't you? Well, what's the chief difficulty of a thought-reader? To find out what people are really thinking of, isn't it? especially when they don't look it, eh? And here I am presenting you with two absolutely sitting shots and all you do is to curse and swear like a trooper! Why, if you play your cards right your fortune's simply made. You'll be a howling success—*the* feature of the next London season! Do be a reasonable chap and show a little decent gratitude. Now I've got a lot to think about: you come along and practise reading *my* thoughts—or you might try on Wilson, I bet he's got some worth knowing."

And, still talking, the irrepressible baronet

drove his ill-fated friend into the house, pausing for a moment to declaim with a theatrical passion which deserved a more sympathetic audience:

> Nought shall make us rue
> If England to himself will be but true!

CHAPTER II

THE TRAIN OF EVENTS

. . . et toujours de l'audace.—DANTON.

MR. WALTON settled himself down in a first-class carriage with a feeling of undisguised content. He had the carriage to himself, and he was enough of a connoisseur in railway travelling to appreciate the comfort of two or three hours in a Great Western express. He was looking forward to his visit: Richard Atherton was his favourite nephew: the house was comfortable and he was glad to be visiting it again after the long interruption of the war: birds were reported to be plentiful, and the shooting he knew to be of the old-fashioned kind which he had learnt to enjoy in his youth. Anyhow he was free from work for a fortnight or so, and, successful man of business though he was, he was not above revelling in a holiday. Nor can it be denied that he bore the prospect of

a brief separation from his wife with a cheerfulness worthy of a better cause. Mrs. Walton, to whom he was sincerely attached, had recently shown a tendency towards ritual and ritualists with which he found it hard to sympathise: "Life and Liberty" had been all very well: his drawing-room had always been at the service of its advocates, and he had spent many hours listening, not without edification, to denunciations of existing abuses in the Church and exhortations to the laity to rise in their thousands and abolish them. This was a matter of sound common sense, and Mr. Walton had all the Englishman's desire to see common sense applied to Church finance and Church affairs generally. But the tack on which his wife (at the instigation of one of the more eloquent of his former allies) had recently gone seemed to him far from being sensible: he could only hope that it was equally far from being common. New phrases were swimming into his ken, and Mr. Walton, though he prided himself on being that *rara avis* a Liberal brewer, was a strict Conservative in matters affecting the English language. He disliked the word Mass: he held strong views on the pronunciation of the word Catholic: he was

unable to believe that the verb "to communicate" could be used transitively. He had no idea what the service of Benediction meant, and had shown unmistakably that he did not want to learn.

Enough has perhaps been said to explain in some measure the sigh of contentment with which he heard the guard's whistle blow and felt the train glide slowly out under the ugliest bridge in Europe.

He drew a letter from his pocket and read it again.

DEAR UNCLE BOB (it began)—I'm awfully glad that you're coming to-morrow and hope we shall have some decent sport. I think you'll like the party. Alice is coming to look after you: she says you haven't met for five years and she hardly thinks you'll know her again. Then there's Montford, who used to be at Eton, and his daughter, and young Ranby (the twin, you know). And I've got a Mrs. Branson and her daughter staying for a few days: they're Americans. I met them in Paris last Spring. Oh, by the way, I do hope you won't mind awfully, but she's a fearful pussyfoot (Mrs. B. of course, I mean; her daughter's quite different), and I was so afraid she might have a row with you and I let her think you were an Indian Civilian

—retired, you know—just to save trouble. She won't know anything about India and you won't have to say anything, but it would have been sickening to have a row, wouldn't it? I do hope you won't think I've let you in, but I was in an awful fright when she began lashing out about beer, and saying she hoped none of my relatives were in that devilish business. So I just didn't see what I *could* say, and India seemed the simplest thing: I suppose it was Uncle Arthur's being there made me think about it. So do forgive me, and after all, I daresay it won't come up at all. We'll send in to meet the 6.52. I'm so sorry Aunt Elizabeth can't come: please give her my love. Your aff. nephew,

RICHARD ATHERTON.

P.S.—By the way, perhaps it's rather lucky about Aunt Elizabeth after all: she mightn't quite understand about India.

P.P.S.—It's just occurred to me that you might like to say you *were* Uncle Arthur: but then there might be more difficulties, so please do just as you think best.—R. A.

No doubt it was the pleasant circumstances in which this letter was read which caused Mr. Walton to accept it with surprising equanimity: it is just possible too that the first postscript contributed to his readiness to

play the part so audaciously thrust upon him. It was quite true that Aunt Elizabeth would have been very far from "understanding about India," whatever that noble phrase might be taken to involve. There is something in sharing a secret, even though it be a rather discreditable one, and the fact remains that Mr. Walton, after shaking his head and muttering, "Confound the young brute!" chuckled gently to himself as he replaced the letter in his pocket.

From High Wycombe to Leamington he slept the sleep of the just: at Leamington and Birmingham his luck still held good and his privacy was undisturbed, and he felt that he had no cause of complaint when at Wolverhampton two intruders entered his carriage. The first, who established himself in the seat opposite him, was a stout gentleman whose gold watch-chain revelled in its opportunities for display: the second, a cherubic young man in a grey flannel suit and dark tie who settled down in the other corner. His portable luggage consisted of a gun-case, and the porter who put it in appeared to know him well. He was soon deep in a perusal of the *Field*.

The stout gentleman felt the heat, as stout

gentlemen will: it made him restless, and after some ineffectual efforts to go to sleep it was clear that he was bent on conversation. He had brought a local paper with him and found there his text for a frontal attack on Mr. Walton.

"I don't know what we're coming to," he said indignantly; "here's a young parson telling the Government it ought to take over all the breweries. Have you seen this, sir? Let me read it you.

"Titled Cleric on Trade Scandals

"The Hon. the Rev. Paul Ranby in an address to the C.E.M.S. at Withbeach on Friday denounced the liquor traffic as a disgrace to a Christian country. The reverend gentleman declared that if the Government did its duty it would take forcible steps to stop drink being sold in this country for private profit. Mr. Ranby, who is the younger son of the Earl of Stoke, is becoming a well-known figure on Labour platforms in the district."

"I call it a disgrace," he went on hotly. "Why can't a parson stick to his job? he knows very well the Trade's always been a good friend to the Church. Bitin' the hand that feeds him, I call it! I don't hold with

parsons in politics, stirring up ill feeling and setting people against one another. Damned insolent young aristocrat! What does *he* know about it, I should like to know?"

Mr. Walton had listened with some embarrassment to this tirade: he had been a brewer long enough to have had cause often to pray for salvation from his friends, and he hesitated for a moment before replying. It was with relief as well as surprise that he heard the cherubic young gentleman in the corner take up the conversation.

"I don't quite see," he said gently, "why a parson shouldn't have an opinion about drink: any one who drinks in this country is bound to be some one's parishioner, unless they're all *bona fide* travellers, I mean, like you and me, and that's rather a lot to expect."

The stout gentleman glared indignantly.

"Well, young man," he said, "what I say is, it'll be a bad day for this country when parsons take to politics; and who is this young Ranby anyway? A conceited young puppy, I'll be bound."

"When I made that speech," said the young gentleman with an air of extreme detachment, "I wasn't thinking about politics, I was thinking about my parish. If you'd

worked in the Potteries for five years you'd have seen enough drink to last you for your lifetime without taking any yourself. It cured me, I can tell you."

And he resumed his study of the *Field*. The stout gentleman gasped. Like so many of his class, he combined a theoretical contempt for the aristocracy with a strong practical veneration for them: and the idea that he had insulted the son of Lord Stoke, whose name is a power in the Midlands, combined with the heat to reduce him to an almost apoplectic condition.

"No offence, I hope, sir," he murmured.

"Not in the least," said Mr. Ranby: "would you care to look at the *Field?*"

His antagonist accepted the offer gratefully: the trio travelled in silence to Shrewsbury, when the stout gentleman, again murmuring apologies, made haste to descend and to spread, no doubt, among his acquaintances the story of the singular affability of Lord Stoke's younger son. "Quite a nice little talk we had together: not as we agreed, certainly, but I told him just what I thought, and he was as pleasant as could be. It's not every one can tell a gentleman when they

see one, but trust me, he's the real thing and no mistake!"

Mr. Ranby allowed Mr. Walton to precede him. "I wonder if I was an ass," he thought to himself, as he slowly got down his gun-case from the rack: "but I couldn't hear him abuse old Paul like that without saying something—and it was much more complete to give it him straight from the shoulder. By Jove, it was a score though!" And he chuckled audibly to himself. "But it's made me quite warm," he went on; "I think I'll go and have a drink. When's the train for Drayworth, porter?"

"You've got twenty minutes, sir."

"Good business!" said the pseudo Mr. Ranby, and having given instructions to the porter, he betook himself to the refreshment-room. He ordered a gin and ginger and stood waiting idly by the counter, when he became aware of the presence of Mr. Walton who had come up behind him.

"Excuse me," said the latter, "but I should just like to tell you how much I enjoyed your little spar with that old bounder in the train. I don't mean that I go all the way with you, but he deserved all he got. Shocking old brute! A glass of beer, please,"

he went on to the barmaid. "Now there," he added, turning to his neighbour, "there's a good thing you've cut yourself off from: I don't say I don't respect your principles, mind you, but I should be very sorry not to be able to have my glass of beer on a warm day."

"Your gin and ginger, sir," said the barmaid, placing a glass on the counter.

The pseudo Mr. Ranby caught a glance of surprise on Mr. Walton's countenance: in a moment his decision was taken. "I'm afraid I only asked for ginger beer," he said meekly.

"You said gin and ginger," said the barmaid severely.

"Oh no, surely not," said he; "the fact is I've got an unfortunate stammer and I must have said gin-ginger beer by mistake. Of course I'll pay for it," he went on, seeing her still unconvinced, "and perhaps you, sir, will be good enough to drink it?"

"No, no," said Mr. Walton, laughing. "I'm sorry not to help you, but I don't care for these new-fangled drinks. Here's my glass of beer—that's all I care for."

The pair drank in silence; the younger revolving mournfully the difficulty into which

his momentary outburst had plunged him. "However," he thought hopefully, "the old boy's safe to go off soon, and I can nip round to the other platform: they can't know I'm a temperance enthusiast there!" His companion's next words undeceived him.

"I beg your pardon," he said, "but aren't you going to the Athertons? I saw you had a gun with you, and I think—yes, I remember now, of course! You're the Mr. Ranby my nephew told me was coming. That's very good, we can continue our journey together."

The heart of the pseudo Mr. Ranby sank lower and lower. Memories of his childhood ran hurriedly through his brain,

> O what a tangled web we weave
> When first we practise to deceive.

"And this *is* a tangled web and no mistake!" thought he: "can Dick have told him Paul was coming? Anyhow, there's no help for it now." And he said aloud, "Yes, Dick Atherton's an old friend of mine. And you're his uncle! Of course we must go on together."

Mr. Walton paid for his glass of beer and preceded his victim to the carriage. The victim's brain was working wildly: a thought occurred to him. "I'll be with you in a

minute," he said, and watching Mr. Walton out of sight he dashed hurriedly into the telegraph office. He scribbled a few words.

Morgan, Pentworth Hall, Stoke. Please forward no letters to Drayworth. RANBY.

"Anyhow, that'll give me a day or two to look round," he said with a sigh; "but I wish to goodness I knew a little more about the clerical life! What's more, I wish to goodness I'd held my tongue altogether, but it's too late now." With this sage reflection he made his way to the Drayworth train.

Mr. Walton welcomed him heartily. He had taken quite a fancy to the young clergyman, with which possibly the unclerical cut of his grey suit had something to do. He looked forward to some discussions with him on modern tendencies in the Church, and was sure that he would find in him a sympathetic hearer for some of his grievances against the neo-Catholics.

Besides he was, as has been hinted, a broad-minded man, and young Mr. Ranby's attack on drink had appealed to his sense of chivalry. He was anxious to hear more from one who clearly spoke from first-hand experience.

"I was much interested," he began, "in what you were saying to our friend in the train. I suppose there is no doubt that things *are* pretty bad in the Potteries. I should like to know what your view is of the remedy?"

His companion hesitated for a moment. "Oh, I don't wish to pose as a statesman," he said; "I only know something of the harm drink does in a poor town parish. I'm very ready to learn wisdom, whatever our stout friend may think. Is it a subject you've studied at all yourself?"

"Well, the fact is," began Mr. Walton, "I've had occasion to consider it rather closely."

He was feeling in his pocket for his pouch as he spoke: he brought it out, and with it his nephew's letter, which he had completely forgotten.

"That is"—he went on more slowly—"so far, of course, as my opportunities have permitted. In India one gets out of touch with home problems very completely."

"Oh, you know India, do you?" said Ranby, clutching at the chance of turning the conversation from the Potteries. "My

brother-in-law's just been sent out there—to Madras. Was that your part at all?"

"It was *not*," answered Mr. Walton with emphasis. "My district was in the extreme interior—an almost inaccessible part, in fact. You must remember," he went on, fearing that he might be committing himself too deeply, "you must remember, of course, Mr. Ranby, that India is a very big place—much bigger than Europe; without Russia no doubt," he added, with a hazy idea of hedging.

"Did you come across much drunkenness in India?" asked the inquiring Ranby, who was fully conscious that attack is the best defence.

"My dear sir," said Mr. Walton solemnly, "you can't exaggerate it: I shall never forget the scenes, the awful scenes, that I've witnessed at a native debauch."

"Really, that's very interesting! I'd no idea of it. Now what do the beggars drink?"

Mr. Walton's pipe was drawing badly. Before answering the question he had to remove it from his mouth and perform some intricate operations: an observer would have said that his brow was puckered with deeper thought than any pipe could cause.

"Bang!" he said at last suddenly.

"I beg your pardon?" said Ranby in some surprise.

"Bang, that's the name of it. I wish I could forget it," he went on unblushingly. "I never wish to be reminded of it again."

He spoke with such fervour that Ranby gazed at him in some surprise: he had heard of the choleric nature of old Anglo-Indians, but Mr. Walton's rosy countenance bore no trace of the ravages of an Eastern sun. However, there was no doubt that it showed that the subject was a painful one, and (so long as he did not revert to the domestic problems of the Potteries) Ranby had every desire to spare him. He gave a sympathetic murmur and picked up the *Field* once more, glancing from time to time at his companion, whose equanimity had been so strangely ruffled. "Poor old bird," he said to himself, "I suppose the climate's played the deuce with his liver!"

Mr. Walton's meditations were less serene. "Confound that young ass of a nephew of mine!" he reflected: "why on earth couldn't he have thought of something else? I shall have to be careful about my facts. I suppose there's an Encyclopædia in the house, but

fancy a man of my age having to spend his holiday cramming up facts out of a geography book! I've a very good mind to tell Dick I won't do it. But then there's this young parson; he'll think I'm a lunatic! Why in the world couldn't I have held my tongue instead of talking like that? I wonder if there *is* a stuff called Bang? I'm sure I've heard of it somewhere. I shall have to look that up now, I suppose. Oh, confound Richard!"

Immersed in such meditations, the pair traversed in silence the short distance from Shrewsbury to Drayworth; a motor awaited them and, buoyed up by a common determination to take Dick into their counsels at the earliest opportunity, they completed their journey to the Manor.

CHAPTER III

IN BORROWED PLUMES

Clothes are emblematic not of want only but of a manifold cunning Victory over Want.—CARLYLE, *Sartor Resartus*.

N their arrival at the house disappointment awaited them. It was Wilson who dealt the blow.

"Sir Richard told me to say he was very sorry, sir, but he's been called away to a political meeting: I believe it has to do with his being elected for Parliament and it seemed it was quite necessary he should be there. He went off just after tea and asked me to tell you he wouldn't be back till very late—perhaps not till to-morrow morning, as he might get kept. He was most particular that I should tell you how sorry he was, and I was to be sure and see that you had everything you wanted."

The one thing which both our travellers most wanted was beyond Wilson's power to supply, and it was with renewed gloom that

they took their way to their rooms, for it was time to dress for dinner.

"By the way, Wilson, who's staying here?" asked Mr. Walton as they went upstairs. "Has Mrs. Howard come?"

"Yes, sir," said Wilson; "yes, sir, Mrs. Howard *has* come."

There was a touch of unnecessary emphasis in the answer which made Mr. Walton glance at him, but Wilson went on with his list.

"And there's Mrs. and Miss Branson, the American ladies, and Archdeacon Montford and Miss Montford—and there's Professor Lapski."

"Lapski? Who's he?" asked Ranby. "I've never heard of him."

"Well, I don't rightly know, my Lord," answered Wilson; "he seems a foreign kind of gentleman, but he only came just after tea, just after Sir Richard left, in fact."

"You mustn't mix me up with my brother, Wilson," said Ranby, smiling.

"I'm sure I beg pardon, sir," said Wilson, "but I understood Sir Richard to say——"

"Oh, you needn't apologise! It's a mistake that's been made before," the young man answered, with that charming smile which had won so many hearts—but to him-

self he added under his breath, "That was a near thing! I hope to goodness I shall keep on remembering!"

Peter Ranby had dissembled his satisfaction at the news that Miss Montford formed one of the house party, but he was no sooner alone than he gave vent to his delight. "That's jolly good of old Dick," said he to himself, "and fancy his not telling me! I owe him a good turn for that." He was whistling gaily as he unlocked his suit-case, when a sudden thought froze the air on his lips. "Good Lord!" he groaned aloud; "and I've got to swear that I'm Paul! What a frightful business!" He sat down on the edge of his bed, the picture of innocence in distress. The situation was indeed acute, and its dangers, which had seemed real enough already, now suddenly appeared in a more sombre hue: he cursed his folly more bitterly than ever.

Indeed—and altogether apart from this last complication—there was no doubt that of the two conspirators Lord Ranby occupied at the moment the more exposed position: Mr. Walton, after all, had only to meet conversational dangers and his constitutional optimism was fast reasserting itself. Ranby

had realised during his brief period of meditation in the train that a searching trial must soon await him: in the train a dark grey suit was all very well: out shooting no one could find fault with a clergyman whose costume was a trifle unconventional or even aggressively lay. Evening dress was a more serious problem—"a stiffish fence," he had called it to himself. It would no doubt be possible to shirk the difficulty altogether by simply wearing a lay costume at the risk of appearing, or rather making Paul appear, careless of convention. But the artist in Peter revolted against such a confession of weakness: it would be to acknowledge a small defeat at the very outset, which could not but have a discouraging effect on the whole campaign. He decided to face the difficulty like a man, and his spirits were too good to be easily damped. At Winchester he and his brother had been conspicuous for a superabundance of vitality, and their cherubic countenances had early won them the name of the Heavenly Twins, though a less flattering adjective had not infrequently been substituted by those whom their vitality annoyed. At Oxford, proctors had had occasion to realise the difficulties

which awaited the antagonists of the couple, and one learned scholar was alleged to have returned to the study of Terence with renewed zest, feeling that in the Twin *motif* at least the ancient dramatist had laid his finger on a living issue. To impersonate one another had been their constant joy, and it was this, no doubt, as well as a feeling of chivalry, which had led Peter so readily so assume the part of the insulted Paul. But of late years the exchange of personality had been more difficult and very rarely attempted: in fact, since Paul had taken Orders the game had only once been played. It was agreed between them that it was only in deference to episcopal scruples and for the better avoidance of scandal that the Reverend Paul Ranby had borrowed his brother's name (and some of his brother's clothes) in order to attend the Grand National. This experiment, though it had been brilliantly successful, clearly threw no light on the immediate problem—How was Peter to dress for dinner?

But, as has been hinted, hope sprang eternal in the Ranby breast, and Peter had silenced alarm by saying to himself that something was sure to turn up. He strolled to the window which looked over the terrace,

and as he looked out of it a new light came into his eye. He had not been disappointed: something had turned up: hope had dawned on him—dressed indeed in unromantic guise, wearing in fact the gaiters of an Archdeacon, but hope for all that. He was in the mood for clutching at straws, and the Archdeacon, though anything but a man of straw, provided at the moment the succour for a drowning man.

He dismissed the footman who had come to unpack his suit-case, saying he would do it himself, but asked him to send him Wilson. On his arrival, the butler found him gazing into a heap of clothes with despair in his eye.

"Oh, Wilson," he said, "I find they've left out my dress waistcoat: I wonder if you could possibly see whether the Archdeacon has one to spare: do you know if he's dressed yet?"

Wilson was not sure: not by any means so sure as his questioner, whose eagle eye had detected the Archdeacon strolling on the terrace: Wilson would see.

"You might give him my compliments and say I should be awfully obliged: and, Wilson, if he's not there perhaps you might

just find one and bring it along: we needn't trouble him."

Wilson departed on his errand and returned with the news that the Archdeacon had gone down, and also with the coveted garment. Dissembling his emotion, Peter took it: his joy was short-lived. He had hoped for an ordinary high-cut waistcoat over which a normal white tie would have shed the glamour of respectability: a trifle Broad Church perhaps, but Paul's reputation would get over that. ("Besides he owes me one," thought Peter, "for standing up for him like that in the train.")

But fortune, which had aided him so far, was powerless or unwilling to cope with the advance in clerical dress: the waistcoat was of the kind described as "cassock" and necessitated that jam-pot collar which has so often flattered the Papacy with dreams of a Roman Catholic revival in England. However, to a determined young man many things are possible: lay collars are reversible, and clerical collars vary as widely as the religious predilections of their wearers, so that when, after five minutes' hard work, Lord Ranby surveyed himself in the glass he was not altogether dissatisfied with the result.

"Just a bit Anglo-Catholic perhaps," he said to himself: "rather a Christian Socialist touch at the back: I'd no idea it was such a job dressing oneself backwards, but I haven't time to put on a clean one. And after all, Paul ought to be jolly thankful I'm not dressing like a layman!"

With which consoling reflection he proceeded to the drawing-room.

On entering, he found his hostess standing before the fireplace listening, with a somewhat glassy eye, to the conversation of the Archdeacon: a rather heightened colour would have betrayed to any intimate friends of Lady Mary Summers that all was not going well with her, though by a blessed compensation it decidedly increased her likeness to Mrs. Howard, whose part she had agreed to play. At the moment of Lord Ranby's entry she was silently wishing that she had never heard that lady's name, and cursing the facility of disposition which had led her to agree to the proposal. On the telephone the adventure had seemed feasible, and even amusing: her likeness to her cousin, Mrs. Howard, had been a mild family commonplace all their lives: it was not striking, but enough to deceive the in-

curious, and with the exception of Uncle Bob, notorious even among uncles for his lack of perception, there was no one at Drayworth who was at all likely to know her. A discreet maid—a judicious choice of clothes appropriate to the wife of a Norfolk squire—it had seemed that nothing more would be required. But since her arrival in the early afternoon things had not been going well: Dick's hasty departure was a great blow: there were a thousand questions she would have liked to ask him, and she reflected—alas! too late—that in many points she was but ill equipped for the work before her. There was, it is true, no substantial room for doubt as to the number of her children: Dick had no doubt spoken airily of "two or three kids"; however, she was practically certain that Alice had only two: but she could not help reflecting, with justifiable irritation, that it was absurd that she should have been left in any doubt as to their sex. One was called Evelyn: there was no doubt of that, but it hardly settled the question, and in her haste she was disposed bitterly to blame Alice Howard, with whom her relations had never been very cordial, for the unfortunate ambiguity.

She could only hope for the best: after all, Mr. Walton was the only person likely to know, and in building on his ignorance of such domestic details she felt that she laid her foundations on a rock. So far all had gone well in her dealings with him. "Bluff, my dear girl, bluff for all you're worth," had been her cousin's parting exhortation, and she had followed it out to the full. Uncle Bob had been, to tell the truth, a little overwhelmed by the warmth of his greeting from his long-lost niece: Alice had never been quite so cordial before—"but still," he reflected, "it's five years since we met, and after all, marriage often opens people's eyes to the merits of their own family." The mild cynicism of this reflection gave him some pleasure, and when Lady Mary gave a little pressure of the hand as she said, "And now we must all try and keep you from ever going back to that horrid India!" her conquest was complete. Here at last was an ally: one to whom he could pour out the bitterness of his soul: her choice of epithet for the land of his unwilling adoption pleased his sense for the *mot juste*, and as Lady Mary turned to meet Professor Lapski she could feel with

justice that she had emerged with credit from the first round.

Miss Mountford, too—that had been an agreeable surprise. It may have been a constitutional distrust of dignitaries and their daughters: it may have been that instinctive aversion to schoolmasters and their belongings which is so marked a characteristic of the English upper classes—but whatever was the reason, Lady Mary had settled it in her own mind that Miss Montford would be a frump. And a frump she palpably was not. She had had time this afternoon to discover that she played a good game of tennis, and had plenty to say for herself: the evening revealed that she also knew how to dress. Her gown of chiffon velvet confessed the hand of a master and its shade of apricot admirably suited her dark colouring.

"She'll do," said Lady Mary to herself; "I only wish I could feel as certain about her father!"

But Lapski—here was a problem for which she was unprepared, and her feeling of ignorance passed rapidly into one of considerable resentment against Dick. It wasn't playing the game to grudge one's partner any possible information which might be useful,

and Dick had certainly been secretive about Lapski. On the telephone he had mentioned "a great thought-reading swell" who was coming, and had added, "I've got a lot to tell you about him," but the promised information had not been forthcoming this afternoon. Her cousin had mentioned him, it is true, but only to give the time of his arrival, and when she asked for further details he had only said airily, "Oh, he'll be all right: you turn him on to talk spiritualism with Mrs. Branson: that'll keep both of them happy," and had turned the conversation to other themes. There had been too little time, and too much to say, for her to press the point, but as she gazed now into his melancholy countenance, clean shaven (for the sacrifice had been made), framed in thick, smooth, black hair and surmounted by round gold spectacles, she felt the gaps in her intelligence-system and blamed Dick bitterly for the poor quality of his staff-work.

Her anger would have been lessened could she have overheard a conversation which had taken place before Captain England had set forth on his travels.

"Look here, Dick," he had said, "I'll take this job on if you're really bent on it. I think

it's a silly business and bound to end in tears and all that, but I'll do it—only on one condition. I'm not going to have you give me away to *any one*, mind you, not to *any one*. I've met Lady Mary once or twice and I'm not going to have her thinking what a fool I look as this infernal professor of yours. It's bad enough having to play the game at all, but, if I do, it's on my own terms and that's flat."

Sir Richard had been surprised at his friend's warmth, but he knew him too well to argue and accepted the conditions without demur. It was a bit rough on Lady Mary perhaps: they might have worked well together: but, after all, things would very likely go better if Lapski's identity remained a complete secret, so he yielded with a good grace, and, though his heart smote him a little for the deception of his trusty ally, he consoled himself by thinking that it would probably be easier for her in the end not to have a third secret to conceal.

Professor Lapski's imperfect command of the English language had made it difficult to gain a clear impression of him: Lady Mary hoped that by putting him next to herself at dinner she would be able to extract some-

thing from him—and then after dinner he could at any rate talk to Mrs. Branson, for whose entertainment she knew that Dick was specially anxious to provide. Lapski was now listening with impenetrable demeanour to the lively conversation of Miss Montford, who appeared to be trying to explain to him the elements of the game of cricket.

And then there was this unexpected appearance of Paul Ranby. The trusty Wilson had conveyed to her the news that it was the younger twin who had arrived. Like him, she had expected his brother, but, now that she came to think it over, she couldn't be sure that Dick had said anything more than "one of the Ranby twins." She knew neither of them and it didn't much matter, but her nerves were a little on edge and a surprise, however trifling, was bad for them. She had arranged for Lord Ranby to take in Miss Branson, and her acquaintance with Americans had taught her that a young peer is a useful asset in their entertainment. He may be regarded with the veneration due to an Old Master, or with the amusement caused by one of George Morrow's Links with the Past, but in either case he has a

quality which a younger son (especially when he is a parson) can hardly hope to equal.

It was, then, to a slightly perturbed hostess that Peter presented himself: his ingenuous countenance disarmed criticism, as it had so often (and so unreasonably) done before: his smile propitiated her.

"I'm so glad to meet you, Mr. Ranby," she said, "I've heard so much about you and your brother from Dick. It's too bad that he isn't here to receive you. I'm not sure if you know Mr. Ranby, Archdeacon?"

"I have not had the pleasure of meeting Mr. Ranby before," said the Archdeacon; "let me see, you were at Winchester, I think? Don't I remember your making a lot of runs against us one year at Eton?"

"Ah no, that was my brother," answered Peter, surrendering with a sigh the possession of his most cherished century. ("That's one more good turn done to Paul," he thought to himself, with a slightly confused sense of honesty; "I'll jolly well make him pay me back some day!")

"And where are you working now?" went on the Archdeacon. "Oh, in the Potteries! Then you'll know my old friend Canon Dawkins. He's a great figure there,

I'm told: I never can help laughing when I think of old Dawkins: quite a character, isn't he?"

Peter assented to the definition with a somewhat wan smile: the eccentricities of the Canon had not penetrated to his knowledge, nor could he form any conjecture as to their nature.

"Has he been doing anything out of the way lately?" inquired the Archdeacon.

"No—no, not *very* lately," answered Peter weakly. Then, as a sudden inspiration came to him, "I wonder what was the last thing that you heard?"

The Archdeacon was chuckling to himself. "Oh, I haven't heard anything since the time the Bishop came to his church—for the Confirmation, you remember—and found old Dawkins had taught all the Sunday School girls to skip round the churchyard singing:

> Why skip ye so, ye little hills,
> Why skip, why skip, why skip?
> 'Tis 'cause we are so glad to see
> His Grace the Lord Bish*i*p!

And all the boys, too—only they were hopping, and said Bish*o*p instead. And you won't have forgotten what the Bishop said?"

But Mr. Ranby's recollection of the Episcopal repartee was not destined to be put to the test, for at the moment the door opened and Mrs. Branson, followed by her daughter, sailed into the room.

The word "sailing," when applied to human beings, has been unjustly appropriated to connote a smoothness of motion which the landsman often fails to connect with his experience of the sea. Mrs. Branson's method of approach was of that jerky and spasmodic order which suggested a small boat, inadequately steered, under a heavy spread of sail. The sail, in this case, if the metaphor is to be prolonged, was supplied by her costume, which was elaborate and expansive. The large pattern of her blue and gold brocade did full justice to her ample proportions: a dog collar of pearls bore up her massive chin: sapphires lent a touch of Apocalyptic splendour: one felt instinctively that the pigs of Chicago could not feel that they had died in vain.

For, indeed, it was from Chicago that Mrs. Branson came, and in her determination and initiative she did not disgrace the city of her origin. She had given convincing proof of her powers in the way in which she

had annexed the hand and guided the career of Mr. Branson, a handsome though somewhat indolent member of a Virginian family. She had early, during a visit to the South, marked him as the man on whom to bestow herself, and the not inconsiderable fortune which her father had left her. Some slight recalcitrance on his part had led to a strategic retreat on hers to the parental fastnesses of Chicago: her friends (in terms destined to reach the ear and touch the heart of Mr. Branson) declared that "Pauline went up North and pined." The manoeuvre had its due effect, and there was no reason to believe that Mr. Branson regretted the choice which made him the prosperous director of a Chicago business house. On the other hand, it is possible that for a man of his temperament the pace was a little too fast, and it was with characteristic equanimity that he had, a few years ago, faced the necessity to retire from Chicago, and, indeed from this world altogether, to enjoy a rest which neither the necessities of his business nor the temperament of his wife had allowed him for his last twenty years.

Mrs. Branson mourned for him sincerely; the good looks of her daughter reminded her

continually of the husband she had lost, and she had devoted a considerable portion of her widowhood to efforts, hitherto vain, to arouse Mr. Branson to reopen communications with her from the other world. His friends found the failure easy to account for, but they were wise enough to keep their theories to themselves. Since his death Mrs. Branson, as has been hinted, had thrown herself warmly into the Prohibition movement, which had at least the merits of distracting her thoughts from her loss, for it was impossible to conceive a cause with which her easy-going husband would have had less sympathy.

For the rest she was a personage who inspired respect not unmingled with alarm, and Richard Atherton in an irreverent mood had described her as one of those ladies whom St. Paul must have had in mind when he spoke of "widows that are widows indeed."

Of her daughter, Diana, it will be enough for the moment to say that she took after her father in appearance. Lady Mary looked her over as she entered the room with that rapidly appraising eye which young ladies reserve for those of their own sex in whom their favourite cousins have shown signs of interest, and Diana stood the test well.

"She's even prettier than she looked this afternoon," Lady Mary thought to herself. "Dick isn't quite such a fool as I thought: but there'll be heavy weather with Mrs. B., or I'm much mistaken!"

So thinking, she advanced to meet Mrs. Branson, whose last tack had brought her within striking distance: Mr. Walton and Mr. Ranby were duly presented: Wilson threw open the door and the company went in to dinner.

CHAPTER IV

CURAE EDACES

O wad some pow'r the giftie gie us
To see oursels as others see us!

BURNS.

THE dinner table was a round one, and a rapid glance satisfied Lady Mary that she had made her dispositions as wisely as circumstances admitted. Mrs. Branson was advantageously placed between the Archdeacon and Mr. Walton, who had taken her in: Ranby had Miss Montford on his right and Miss Branson on his left: she herself was free to divide her attentions between her partner the Archdeacon and the inscrutable Lapski. All that could be done was to hope for the best.

Her anxious eye rested with approval on Diana Branson, whose dress of jade green was in pleasing contrast to her mother's costume and showed her undeniable beauty to full advantage. "Paris, Molyneux," she

said to herself, realising with satisfaction that Miss Branson had found time in the French capital for other interests besides the culture which (according to her mother's account) she had insatiably "absorbed." Her opinion of Dick's judgment rose a little higher still.

The first voice that broke the silence was that of Mrs. Branson. "Well, I do call it real mean of Sir Richard to run off and leave us our first night, but I suppose that politics is not what you might call a restful occupation, and I like to see a young man take right hold of his life's work. Are you a politician, Mr. Walton?"

Mr. Walton's denial of any exclusive political information led to so violent an attack on the mugwump position that he felt bound in self-defence to mention that he had lived much of his life abroad—"in India," he added, feeling that the horrid truth (or falsehood) was bound to come out sooner or later and that he might as well make a virtue of candour.

"India? Well, that is real interesting: there are just thousands of questions about India that I feel like asking."

Mr. Walton groaned inwardly and swallowed down his sherry.

"Now about the position of women. I can't tell you how much I want to know what it feels like for a white woman out there. You are a married man, aren't you? Yes, I might have known that by your looking so gentle" (Mr. Walton blushed): "now I'd like to have you tell me just how Mrs. Walton liked that kind of life."

Her companion breathed again: here at least was a question which could be answered, if not with accuracy, at any rate with some approach to verisimilitude.

"I am afraid," he said, speaking slowly, "I am afraid that I must confess that she did *not* like it at all. It is a subject which we never mention. I can't remember—no, I really can't remember that for the last ten years my wife has so much as mentioned the name of India. I never speak of it to her," he went on, warming to his subject, and feeling that he was on sure ground for once, "and she never speaks of it to me. I respect her silence: I know all that it meant to her."

Mrs. Branson gave a sympathetic murmur. "Well, I expect that's just too true. Those native nurses, now, they must be enough to wear down any mother: I know what I've had to suffer from hired girls at home and

over here, and they *are* white anyway. I expect you found them something terrible?"

Mr. Walton was eating fish: a bone gave him a moment's pretext for delay: he used it to the full and thought very fast. He saw before him a vista of cross-examination on the difficulties of bringing up children in India which he was ill prepared to face: he decided to make a clean cut. Brutus had sacrificed his son: Mr. Walton was prepared to raise him one, and to cut off at a blow the promising career of two sons; one at Oxford and another at Sandhurst.

"Ah no," he said in a voice choked with emotion (though possibly not with the emotion which he intended to convey), "Ah no, it was not that: I am sorry to say that we have no children: it has been our great sorrow."

He cast, as he spoke, a mute glance of appeal at his hostess: she had not followed the conversation, but had heard enough to realise that her titular uncle was in deep waters and came gallantly to the rescue.

"Mrs. Branson," she said, "the Archdeacon was just telling me of a most interesting scheme of his for dealing with dilapida-

tions: I am sure that you would like to hear some of the details he was giving me."

The ruse was successful: the Archdeacon fell with avidity upon his new prey, and Mr. Walton seized the opportunity to ask Miss Montford her opinion on English decadence in lawn tennis.

Lady Mary felt at liberty to devote herself to her other neighbour: she was determined to make some effort to penetrate the mystery that surrounded him.

"Do you know this part of England, Professor?" she began: "I always think Shropshire in September is one of the nicest things we have to show."

"No, madam," replied the Professor sadly, "it is now the first time that I come here: it is very lovely, but it is strange."

"I suppose you have nothing quite like this in your own country?" suggested Lady Mary tentatively, thinking that she saw an opening.

The Professor sighed deeply. "Madam," he said, "for me, I have now no country."

Lady Mary felt baffled: she tried hurriedly to remember any country which could be thought to have recently disappeared, but her knowledge of post-war geography

failed her. She tried another tack. "I wonder if you could explain to me," she said, "just how this Silesian difficulty arose? it is all so confusing to us over here."

She was not prepared for the result of her question.

"Ah," cried the Professor, "what are the Poles to me? Speak of them not, speak not to me of Czecho-Slovaks, Ruthenians, Yugo-Slavs! You shall not talk to me of Lithuanians nor of Croats! What am I that I should hear that all is not well in Transylvania? I cannot bear it."

He ended with a groan and toyed absently with his bread, while his eyes glared wildly round the table. Lady Mary was genuinely alarmed: it seemed useless to disclaim the intention with which he apparently credited her of instructing him in the politics of Eastern Europe: she could only endeavour to soothe him.

"You must forgive me," she said gently, "I had no wish to touch on any painful subject."

The Professor was all apologies on the instant.

"Ah no, gracious lady," he said, "but it is you that must forgive! I teach myself this

long time to forget the little things of this earth: I dwell no more in these your countries. I try to live in the world of thought. Oh, but it is hard, it is hard! And I try all the time to forget—that I may be free to soar (how do you say it?) to the things of the spirit."

The poor Professor's emotion was so unmistakably genuine that Lady Mary felt more contrite than ever.

"Yes, indeed I see," she said, "those other things are so much more real to you: and the things you see must often seem quite unreal and untrue."

Professor Lapski made no answer: his eyes shone behind his large spectacles with a strange light: he gazed round the table with an intent look: he seemed rapt into that other world of thought of which he had spoken.

"I see," he said at last in a low voice, "I see strange things: I know not what they mean."

"What sort of things, Professor?" asked Lady Mary, genuinely impressed and a little alarmed.

"It may be nothing," answered Professor Lapski: "I do wrong to speak: this is not

the time: it is the time of pleasure, of food, of drink, not the time of thought. And yet I cannot help to see when the moment comes. But I meant not to speak of it. Forgive me, gracious lady."

"But do tell me," urged his hostess, whose curiosity was rapidly gaining the upper hand. "What did you think you saw?"

"It was but now," said the Professor heavily, "as you looked upon me with so kind thought, I looked upon you and lo, in a moment all was gone and you were not there!"

"Not there?" gasped Lady Mary, holding tight to the arm of her chair.

"No, it was not you—it was not Mrs. Howard that sat there, but another lady—oh, not so beautiful (you will forgive), an older lady, like you, yes, but not you."

The Professor drank a little champagne: the strain of his vision had evidently told upon his nerves. Lady Mary had turned a little pale: her Professor was proving more interesting than she had expected and rather clearer-sighted than she could have wished. "It must be nonsense," she told herself; "he can't possibly see through me like that:"

her self-possession gradually returned and she thought of a new test.

"My dear Professor," she said, smiling though a little shakily, "I do hope that doesn't mean I'm going to vanish away! It doesn't mean anything dreadful, does it? And did you see anything else just now when the vision came to you?"

The Professor was silent: he turned his gaze round the table again and the same dull light shone in his eyes once more: they turned from one guest to another and settled at last on the unconscious Mr. Walton.

"Surely you don't see Mr. Walton vanishing away?" asked Lady Mary airily, though with a qualm at her heart.

The Professor was still silent: he sniffed gently two or three times. "A strange smell is in my nostrils," he said dreamily, "it is not a smell of flowers, no, nor yet of beast: it is a bitter smell: it is not a smell that I knew as a child in my far home: it is a smell of this land of yours: a smell of London."

He sniffed again interrogatively, and a pleasant smile lighted up his gloomy face.

"Ah gracious lady, but you will laugh at me and my dreams! it cannot be. I am tired, and do wrong to speak of such things to you."

"Oh do tell me what it is!" cried Lady Mary, who had been hanging on his words. "What is this English smell, this London smell?"

"You will forgive me, madam," said Lapski with a deprecating smile: "I laugh at myself, but what I felt was like the smell of beer!"

The Professor ended with a low laugh. Lady Mary endeavoured to laugh too, but her throat was a little dry. Her brain was going round: could it really be that her neighbour had this mysterious power? it was absurd! but how else to account for it? she looked at him with redoubled interest, but the strange man had turned his head away and was listening to the conversation across the table.

And, indeed, it was high time that the hostess also should attend to her other guests, whom she had forgotten in her absorption with Lapski. The Archdeacon's conversation, like all conversations in which Mrs. Branson was engaged, had rapidly drifted in the direction of drink. The Archdeacon had dilated on the temperance experiments which had recently been tried in his diocese, and had appealed to Ranby for confirmation

from his experience in the Potteries. Ranby had kept up his end with some difficulty, and finding himself hard pressed had shamelessly endeavoured to drag Mr. Walton into the conversation.

"You ought really to ask Mr. Walton," he said, "we had a most interesting conversation in the train about drunkenness in India, and I have no doubt he can tell you a lot about temperance work there."

The worthy brewer was by this time deep in a discussion of Test Match tactics with Miss Montford, and was almost visibly unwilling to be disturbed, but a direct challenge from the Archdeacon left him without resource.

"Oh yes," he said testily, "they drink like fishes: horrible sight, horrible sight," and he made as though he would return to his discussion with his neighbour.

But the Archdeacon was not to be denied, and his daughter knew him too well to connive at his disappointment.

"That is really most interesting, painfully interesting," he said. "I had always fancied that in hot climates temperance was more common: and what is the beverage that produces these unfortunate results?"

Mr. Walton sipped his champagne. "Ghi!" he said defiantly.

Ranby, despite his sympathy, could not refrain from saying, "But I thought, sir, you told me it was Bang they chiefly drank?"

"They are two names for the same thing," said Mr. Walton, his face flushed with anger: "Ghi-Bang, Bang-Ghi—you don't suppose that a man lives half his life in India without knowing the native names! It's a land of synonyms, sir! Why, I daresay there are twenty names for the drink, and some of them names that I couldn't repeat in a company like this!"

Miss Montford gave a little cry, whether of pleasure or alarm, and Mr. Walton tossed off the rest of his glass of champagne and glared defiantly at the Archdeacon.

"Now I call that real interesting," said Mrs. Branson. "I had always fancied that Ghi was melted butter and I never should have dreamt it could be that stimulating: but no doubt they'd have a different breed of cows."

"Yes, I agree with Mrs. Branson," went on the Archdeacon, "I too had always understood that Ghi was a kind of melted butter: don't you remember it being mentioned in

one of those children's books you used to have, my dear?" he added to his daughter.

"Yes, papa, I think I do," said the dutiful young lady.

Mr. Walton was being pressed on all sides, and was cursing the momentary lapse of memory which had used up the only other Oriental word which he could at the moment remember, when help came to him from an unexpected quarter.

"The Cossacks," said the deep voice of Professor Lapski, "they drink the milk of the mare, and they are not sober, no? Butter he comes from milk; the milk of the mare, the milk of the cow, it is all one. It is as the gentleman has said. Have I not seen the Ghi factories in Turkestan, and the very dromedaries to drink of it and roll in the bazaar?"

Circumstantial testimony of this kind could not be disputed: harmony was restored: Mr. Walton cast a grateful glance at the Professor, but that gentleman had relapsed into his own meditations and failed (it is to be hoped) to hear the irreverent developments of the idea of a drunken dromedary with which Lord Ranby was amusing Miss Branson.

Archdeacon Montford was less easily satisfied: he looked for a moment as though he would like to cross-question the Professor, but his attention was recalled by Mrs. Branson, who desired to transfer the subject from the particular to the general.

"I see in that anecdote," she said, "a regular mine of argument for the cause of temperance. When a four-footed brute proves unable to resist the insidious effects of melted butter, it is demonstrably true that man is little likely to fare better before the fermented temptations of the saloon. The amount of labour wasted annually in the production of beer alone in these islands would be enough to drain St. George's Channel and settle the Irish question once for all. And when I think," she added, "that there exist in this country men of high social position who positively batten on the degradation of their fellow men—well, I have feelings of horror and disgust which I cannot easily express. When I think of those poor deluded dromedaries——" her voice faltered.

As her eye ranged round the table it challenged Mr. Walton and Professor Lapski, who were the only gentlemen who had been drinking wine, for the unfortunate

Ranby was still the victim of his rash utterance in the train. The Professor was unmoved, but Mr. Walton, whose temper was still slightly ruffled by his narrow escape, was evidently meditating a rejoinder. Lady Mary felt that discretion enjoined an early retreat, and was successful in catching Mrs. Branson's eye as it played with menacing light upon the impassive Professor. The ladies retired to the drawing-room, and one at least of the company wiped the beads of perspiration from his brow.

CHAPTER V

CHESTNUTS AND WINE

Old Eton places, old Eton faces.—AINGER.

THE departure of Mrs. Branson from the dining-room left a feeling of calm in the air. Mr. Walton breathed again: he had come very near to losing his temper with a lady, and the idea was shocking to his old-fashioned courtesy: besides, he realised that in his anxious position he needed to have all his wits about him. He gave a sigh of relief as he mopped his brow and settled again into his chair, but a glance round the table reawakened his alarms in a lively form. He had noticed Lapski's eye resting on him once or twice with a penetrating gaze, the sort of look which causes even an innocent man to brush anxiously at his face to remove a possible speck of dirt, and Mr. Walton, as we know, was far from being an innocent man.

"Confound the fellow," he thought to

himself, "he looks at me as if he was sure I'd got something to conceal: but he can't possibly know anything." His gaze next rested on Ranby and he found no consolation there. "He seems a nice young fellow," he thought, "but I wish I could be quite sure what I told him in the train. I didn't half like the way he caught me up just now about that Bang business. However, we must hope for the best, and thank heaven he's taking on the Archdeacon for a bit!"

He did not feel inclined for a *tete-a-tete* with the Professor and drew up his chair to listen to the conversation of the other two.

Ranby, who had motives of his own for propitiating the Archdeacon, was conscious that he had not so far made a very favourable impression: he was anxious to improve it.

"I suppose, sir," he began, "you find your present work a great change after Eton? it must be a very different kind of life!"

The Archdeacon unbent. "Yes, indeed," he answered, "it is different, very different! Our warm-hearted Lancashire folk are wonderful people, but one often finds oneself sighing for a Division of Eton boys again, with their keen eager young faces. They are wonderfully receptive, wonderfully recep-

tive! No doubt you find work among lads the most repaying in your parish?"

But Peter was not to be drawn into the Potteries without a struggle. "I can quite understand what you say," he replied. "I have often heard Dick say how much he enjoyed being 'up to you' in old days."

This indeed was true, though not entirely for the reasons which Archdeacon Montford supposed.

"I forget what was your subject?" Peter went on.

"Science," said the Archdeacon, "science! a wonderful subject for the growing mind! There is something in its exact methods which makes an appeal even to the most thoughtless boy. Often and often they have begged me to repeat some experiment that they might study it more closely: it was inspiring, most inspiring."

Professor Lapski, who was listening with deep interest, could not help remembering that at Eton it had been the almost consistent failure of the Archdeacon's experiments which had constituted the chief attraction to his pupils, but his face betrayed no sign of his memories.

"Yes, I remember the science hours at

Winchester," said Ranby. "I always said there was nothing like Sti—like science," he corrected himself.

"And then I taught a good deal of geography," went on Archdeacon Montford. "The relations of science and geography are still, I fear, very imperfectly understood. There is far too much of that insistence on the mere memorising of names and places, instead of a reasoned account of the effect of climatic conditions on the life and work of the people. For instance, Mr. Walton," he went on, turning to the brewer, "I don't think I heard you mention the name of your district in India?"

Mr. Walton had been allowing his thoughts to wander and was quite unprepared for so sudden an attack: he choked over his port, which caused his face to turn a deep red; "Masulipatam!" he spluttered, giving the word almost the effect of an imprecation.

"Ah, indeed," said the Archdeacon, "now it may seem presumptuous of me, but I daresay I could tell you some facts about the precise causes of the rainfall and the barometric conditions which would be a surprise to you with all your experience on the spot.

The practical man, you know, has always something to learn from the man of science, however much you may laugh at us—ha, ha!"

Mr. Walton thought it highly probable that the Archdeacon's revelations would prove very strange to him. He was occupied at the moment in considering how and when he had heard the name Masulipatam, and where on earth it could be. His face exhibited such signs of perturbation that the chivalrous Ranby, remembering his agitation in the train, decided to spare him and to throw himself into the breach once more.

"But to go back to what we were speaking of, Archdeacon," he resumed, "I suppose you find your working-class congregation very different from those in the Chapel at Eton?"

The Archdeacon gave a sigh of happy recollection—"Indeed yes," he said, "it is a great change. I have none but the happiest memories of Eton Chapel, none but the happiest memories."

Captain England found it difficult to repress the ghost of a smile: he had a memory too in which the Archdeacon had a share: it was a happy memory, but he doubted very much whether it was among

those which the Archdeacon at the moment recalled with such satisfaction. It was the memory of a hot Sunday afternoon: a boy had fainted: Mr. Montford, full of zeal, had come to the rescue and had lifted him from his place: he was bearing him triumphantly down the aisle, when his foot slipped and he fell with a crash which effectually roused his unconscious burden. The picture of dignity in distress was deeply graven on the memories of the irreverent youths who had been fortunate enough to witness it. England repressed his smile and lent over to listen again.

"I daresay you were never in Eton Chapel, Mr. Ranby?" the Archdeacon was saying

"Yes, sir, I was there once," said Peter. "I came over for the match—that is, to see my brother play, of course," he added with a twinge of recollection. "I remember thinking it seemed very big after Winchester, but I hope you won't mind my saying I thought your ventilation rather poor. Of course it was a very hot time of year!"

The Archdeacon did not altogether relish the criticism. "Do you know Eton Chapel, Mr. Walton?" he asked. "Ah no, I suppose your long absence from home has not given you the chance."

The brewer gratefully accepted the reprieve.

"And you, Professor, I wonder if you have ever visited Eton? You should make a point of doing so if you get the chance!"

The Professor fixed his gloomy eyes upon his questioner.

"I see Eton, yes," he answered; "once it is long ago. It was in the time of heat and the Chapel she was warm, yes! There was a little boy, oh, quite small, and he had what you call a faint, is it not so? And a professor he come to help him and to carry him out. And, as he go, he fell! And the other little boys to laugh! it was very droll," he ended, with a soundless chuckle.

The Archdeacon had got very red: it had been a painful moment, and it was the worst of luck that this foreigner should have witnessed the *debacle*. He clearly had no suspicion of his own connection with the scene, but the incident did not encourage the Archdeacon to persevere in his well-meant efforts to bring him into the conversation. He decided to give it a new turn.

"Canon Dawkins was telling me the other day," he went on, turning to Ranby, "of the great missionary campaign which has just

been going on in the Potteries: I should like to hear what you thought of it: I understand that Dawkins himself took a very leading part, though naturally he is too modest to say so himself. I wonder if you heard any of his addresses?"

Ranby hesitated for a moment: he was beginning heartily to dislike the excellent Canon Dawkins, but he did not dare to disown him altogether.

"Yes, they were quite wonderful," he said, and then, feeling that more was required of him, he decided to take a risk. "It's extraordinary that at his age he can still be so vigorous."

"He is an exact contemporary of my own," said the Archdeacon coldly, "and I cannot agree that that is a great age."

Peter swore beneath his breath. "Dear me!" he said aloud, "I should have thought you were at least ten years his junior."

The Archdeacon was visibly pleased. "Ah well," he answered, "poor old Dawkins has never taken any care of his health, and he certainly is getting a little bald," he added, passing his hand over his own thick head of hair.

The dangerous moment had passed, but it

had been too acute to be pleasant, and Ranby felt no time must be lost. "I've done old Walton one good turn," he said to himself, "and I don't see why I should sacrifice myself for ever."

He went on aloud. "But I've no doubt Mr. Walton can tell us at first hand a great deal about missionary work: I remember Canon Dawkins pointed to India as quite the most interesting field at the present moment." He leant back in his chair and surveyed with mischievous enjoyment the trouble he had caused: "after all," he thought, "he can't expect *never* to have to talk about India, and I'm sure the old Potteries deserve a bit of a rest!"

Mr. Walton was fairly in for it: he set his teeth and did his best. Hazy recollections of missionary meetings stood him in good stead, and luckily for him the Archdeacon (no doubt as a result of his training as a schoolmaster) was more anxious to impart information than to extract it.

But, when all is said, it was a very bad quarter of an hour through which the hapless brewer passed: he employed any momentary respite that he obtained in vowing vengeance against his unconscious nephew, and it was

a visibly shaken man who, at the earliest possible moment, suggested that it was time to rejoin the ladies in the drawing-room.

CHAPTER VI

MOTHER AND SONS

Mary had a little lamb.—*Old Ballad.*

"AND now, Mrs. Howard," said Mrs. Branson, settling herself in a large armchair which she completely filled, "while those two young things amuse themselves, you and I can have a real cosy talk. I can't tell you how I want to hear you describe to me all your little family. I'm what they call a good American, and we have plenty of things in that old country which take a lot of beating—but there's something intimate about the English home life which we never seem rightly to get a hold of. And so I just want you to tell me all about your little chicks: I've heard about them from your brother a bit, but then a man never seems to know just those little things which a mother wants to hear. So you just start in right away! and don't you be afraid of tiring me.

You may think I'm one of those platform women who don't understand: but you just try me! You'll find I'm that full of sentiment you'd hardly credit. My dear husband often used to speak of it: 'Pauline' (he's said to me a hundred times if he's said it once) 'Pauline, I just don't know how you manage it: one time you seem as keen on business as if you'd been brought up in Wall Street, and the next moment you're that soft and simple you might have spent all your days in Philadelphia.' So you just start right in and tell me all about them. How old are they, anyway?"

Lady Mary had not been expecting so rapid and direct an attack: the events of the last hour or two had caused her to think of Mrs. Branson rather as an elemental force than as a human being, and it was a moment or two before she could realise (what was certainly the truth) that the yards of blue brocade before her enveloped a maternal heart, and that the neck so firmly embraced by the dog collar of pearls could unbend in any conceivable nursery. The torrential exhortation to which she had listened gave her a moment to collect her thoughts and she answered without hesitation.

"How sweet of you, Mrs. Branson! I shall be delighted to talk nursery with you. Evelyn is three and the baby just over twelve months."

"That's good," said Mrs. Branson; "weight at birth?"

Her hostess jumped a little at the rapid question, but on the principle that you may as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb, answered rapidly, "eleven pounds."

"My!" said Mrs. Branson, gazing at Lady Mary with increased respect, "they'll do you credit I'll be bound. You use patent foods any?"

"Only Nestle's," said her victim unblushingly. "I find it is cheapest and has best results," she went on, recalling by some automatic process the last advertisement she had read.

"Well, I guess they must be two sweet little boys," said Mrs. Branson with a sigh.

Was it the demon of self-conceit that tempted Lady Mary to her fall? She had passed so well through the early stages of her ordeal that she might have left well alone, but she succumbed to the temptation of the artist to gild the refined gold.

"Oh no," she said, "it's a boy and a girl:

Evelyn is a little girl and the baby's the only boy."

"And who's this cute little fellow?" said Mrs. Branson, picking up a photograph which stood framed on a table at her elbow. "Oh I see, he's got his name written—'Evelyn Howard, aged 4.' But I thought you said he was a girl?"

Lady Mary blushed scarlet, and uttered a silent malediction on her own imprudence: why hadn't she remembered? why hadn't Dick told her? why, above all, hadn't she had the sense to notice the accusing photograph? But she was fairly in for it now and she set her teeth.

"Oh that?" she said in a low voice, "that's my husband's son by his first marriage."

"Ah dear, dear, and that'll be the poor little boy's mother, I suppose," said Mrs. Branson, looking at a larger photograph on the same table. "Well, isn't that too queer? She's like you, and yet I should know you apart, and she has the same name too—Alice. And your little girl's called Evelyn too! Well, I must say you have to keep pretty wide awake in your family with two Alices and two Evelyns, let alone their being

two different sexes: she looks a fine strong young thing in her picture—but there, one never knows which of us mayn't be taken."

At this point Lady Mary suddenly saw red: anger at herself for her blunder, anger at her own embarrassment, anger at her insatiable questioner combined to make her plunge deeper and deeper.

"No," she said in a voice shaking with fury, though the worthy Mrs. Branson attributed it to grief. "No, she's not dead. I sometimes wish to Heaven that she were! She left my husband in very distressing circumstances, Mrs. Branson, and I must beg you not to ask me more. It is a subject on which I find it very difficult and painful to speak."

Mrs. Branson was genuinely distressed at the sad memories she had aroused: she pressed Lady Mary's hand in silent sympathy, and suggested tactfully that her daughter might be asked to play: "She has studied under the best masters in the old country, Mrs. Howard, and they are unanimously of the opinion that she has a real gift for the instrument."

Her hostess caught at the proposal, and while Diana performed at the piano, with a

touch which justified her mother's praise, she reflected gloomily on the needless difficulties into which she had incautiously plunged. A stepson was an uncalled for burden, but why had she not been content with that, without superadding the difficulties of a divorce? Uncle Bob must be warned—but no, it was impossible to speak to him. Nothing could be done till Dick returned, and the set jaw with which she registered that conclusion boded ill for the peace of mind of the irresponsible baronet.

It was a relief when the arrival of the gentlemen changed the gloomy course of her meditations: Mrs. Branson annexed Professor Lapski, whose gloom grew deeper, if possible, as he listened to her conversation. The Archdeacon stationed himself by the piano, while Ranby made his way to Miss Montford whom he knew for a congenial spirit, and in whose company he foresaw at least a brief respite from clerical topics. "But I shall have to be uncommon careful," he said to himself; "it wouldn't do to have old Paul cutting me out, confound him! I must go slow, deuced slow." Mr. Walton and his hostess were left together, and it was a relief to her to find one who was, though he

knew it not, a fellow victim with herself. He was only too ready to unbosom himself to his niece.

"My dear Alice," he said hotly, though in a low voice, "the thing's getting unbearable. When that infernal young ass, your brother, asked me to take on the part of an Indian Civilian I little guessed what it meant, or I'd have seen him damned first. You must forgive my strong language, my dear," he added apologetically, "but really my life's been a perfect misery for the last hour or so. First there's that silly old woman getting up a row about drink, and letting me in for talking a lot of nonsense about Ghi or Bang or whatever the beastly stuff's called—and since you've been gone that Archdeacon's been at me hammer and tongs about Foreign Missions and mass movements and so on. I don't know what I've said: I know it was as little as I could, but at last he asked me right out where I'd been stationed, and I said Masulipatam, just because it came into my head. And now I don't know whereabouts it is! And that's not the worst of it, for I'd told young Ranby this afternoon I lived right up in the middle of the country, and if Masulipatam's on the coast, as it's ten to one

it is, I'm simply done for. I suppose there's a map or something in the house, but I tell you what it is, Alice, I simply can't stand the strain of it, and I won't, and as soon as Master Dick's come back I'm going to have it out with him and tell him so."

The worthy brewer mopped his forehead, and went on more quietly. "You must forgive me making such a fuss, my dear, but you've no idea what a strain it is living a double life like this." Mr. Walton little knew how responsive an echo his words awakened in his hostess's heart. "And then there's that fellow Lapski," he added, "I don't half like his looks, nor the way he looks at me. I caught him at it once or twice at dinner."

The mention of Lapski reminded Lady Mary of the shock she had received at dinner, which had faded into the background under the stress of later emotions: her alarm revived now in double measure. Surely it was right to give Mr. Walton some warning of his danger?

"No, Uncle Bob," she answered in the same low tone, "I don't half like him either. I can't help being afraid he's dangerous. Do you know at dinner he had one of his visions, or whatever they're called, and got

quite excited, and I asked him what it was and he kept looking at you and sniffing and saying that he smelt beer."

"What!" cried Mr. Walton, rising in his seat, "confound his impudence!"

"Oh, do speak quietly, Uncle Bob! He really didn't say it impertinently. I can't help wondering if there mayn't be something in his *clairvoyance:* there were one or two other things he told me which really were most remarkable. I can't tell you what they were, but they more than half convinced me that he really did see things that weren't on the surface."

"Well, that settles it," said Uncle Bob, "it's bad enough being a sham Indian Civilian without having a specially trained detective on one's track. I shall speak to Master Dick the very moment he gets back."

"My dear Uncle Bob," said Lady Mary, "you can have no idea how warmly I sympathise with you" (it's a relief, she thought to herself, to say something that's undeniably true), "but I do hope you'll just wait till you see him, and give the poor old boy a chance. I know he'll be wretched at the thought of what he's let you in for."

Mr. Walton growled—but his good nature

was fast reasserting itself now that he had blown off steam, and as there was clearly nothing to be done except to wait for Dick he made the concession with a good grace.

No further untoward incident marred the harmony of the evening. Mr. Walton had a game of bridge with the three younger members of the party, and as the Professor and Mrs. Branson were still deep in conversation Lady Mary surrendered herself to the Archdeacon, who maintained an impassioned monologue on the follies of bishops, the conservatism of incumbents, and the excessive Liberalism of the unbeneficed clergy, leaving on the mind of his hearer the inevitable reflection that impeccability was the property of Archdeacons alone.

At last the hour arrived when the ladies might reasonably retire. The Archdeacon, who was no smoker, decided to go to bed, while the other three sought the smoking-room, each with the deep-seated but concealed determination to stay up till Sir Richard came home and to have a few earnest words with him in private.

In these circumstances conversation was not likely to flourish, and indeed few words were exchanged. The Professor sat deep in

a chair, plunged in meditations apparently of the gloomiest order: Mr. Walton prowled round the bookshelves, conducting an uneasy and furtive search for an atlas or for an encyclopedia: Lord Ranby toyed for some time with a novel and then betook himself to writing letters. Midnight arrived without Sir Richard: it brought instead Wilson, to say that a telephone message had just come through to say that his master could not be back for at least another hour. The prospect of a prolonged vigil was not alluring, and as none of the three showed any signs of creating a solitude for any of the others, they decided by common but unspoken agreement to go to bed.

CHAPTER VII

THE LETTER GAME

To-morrow and to-morrow and to-morrow.
SHAKESPEARE.

IR RICHARD'S slumbers were broken by Wilson at what seemed to the baronet an unreasonably early hour.

"Beg pardon, but there are some notes for you, Sir Richard, all marked immediate," said the butler.

His master yawned and stretched out his hand: there was no doubt about it: in their different degrees each bore the marks of urgency. "Please deliver *at once*." "Immediate." "Personal and urgent." "To be given to Sir Richard before breakfast." He opened one at random: it was from Ranby.

MY DEAR DICK—I'm in the devil of a mess and have had to pass myself off as Paul: I'll explain why when we meet. Don't give me away. Yours ever,

PETER.

P.S.—I'll be up early to-morrow, and if you could be in the smoking-room before breakfast I'll tell you how it happened.

Sir Richard chuckled. "By Jove! the plot thickens!" he said. I didn't think there was going to be a fourth conspirator in the party: I wonder what on earth Peter's been up to! Let's see how the rest are getting on"—and he opened the second letter. It was from his uncle.

My dear Dick—This is just a hurried line to let you know that your idiotic scheme has nearly worn me out. It hasn't saved me from that meddling old Transatlantic lunatic and it has nearly worn me to a shadow. I've talked it all over with your sister and she quite agrees that the game is up. You must get yourself (and me) out of it the best way you can: anyhow just understand that I've done with it. I'll wait till I've had a word with you and I think the best plan would be if you came down to the smoking-room before breakfast to-morrow. I'll be on the look out for you and we can have a few minutes' quiet talk, but don't fancy you're going to talk me over, for my mind's made up. I'd sooner go back to London to-morrow than go on with this infernal game.—Yr. aff. uncle,

R. Walton.

Sir Richard whistled. "Poor old Uncle Bob! he must have been having a rotten time. I wonder what Mary said to him. Perhaps one of these is from her: yes! let's have a look at it." The third letter was longer and more explicit.

My dear old Dick—Well, I can tell you I've stretched my affection for you to the furthest point and it's wearing a bit thin! We've had the most fearful evening. Your poor old Uncle Bob is nearly at the end of his tether and I don't wonder: he's been baited by Mrs. Branson and the Archdeacon, and seems to think he's given a wrong address in India and may be spotted at any moment.

And then that Professor Lapski seems to have some suspicions of him (and of me too for that matter) which made us both fearfully uncomfortable. And I've had a *dreadful* time with Mrs. B. I had to tell her that George was married before, and that his wife ran away and he divorced her, and that I'm his second wife. I know it sounds absurd, but you've no idea how one thing leads to another. If you'll be in the smoking-room before breakfast to-morrow I'll explain it all: it takes too long on paper. I really don't think I *can* go on: anyhow I know I can't go on listening to the Archdeacon! I've had a solid hour of him to-night—I hoped he'd

get on with Mr. Ranby, but they hardly seem to have anything in common and I didn't think the Archdeacon took to him at all.

Well, I must go to bed: it's been a most fearful strain. Au revoir *early* to-morrow.—Yrs. affly.

MARY.

P.S.—I think Diana's *charming*.

P. P. S.—Who is Professor Lapski?

This letter gave Sir Richard plenty of food for thought: "Poor old Mary!" he murmured; "she must have had the very devil of a time, too, but what on earth made her drag the family into the divorce court? And Peter too: I'm not surprised the Archdeacon thought him a queer sort of parson!" He re-read the letter, and this time he paused at the postscripts: "I'm glad she likes Diana," he thought, "but I knew she would." " 'Who is Lapski?' " "Good old Smiler, I knew he'd play up!"

The last letter was from his friend England. It was short and to the point.

Be in the smoking-room to-morrow before breakfast. I must have a word with you. T. E.

"By George!" observed the baronet; "there'll be some sport in the smoking-

room: I'd better get there and be in at the death." And the baronet sprang out of bed.

Mr. Walton had risen early after a disturbed night: his sleep had been fitful and the dreams which had visited him had not conduced to repose. A howling mob of natives mounted on dromedaries, obviously the worse for liquor, and urged on by the sinister figure of Lapski, had formed the central piece of his most coherent vision: in another he had seen his wife sitting side by side with Mrs. Branson and had awakened with a shout of terror just as she opened her lips to speak: he felt a moral certainty that the word he had screamed out was *Masulipatam*.

To a man of orderly habits, who normally enjoyed eight hours of dreamless sleep, these experiences were most distressing: he rose from his fevered couch more than ever determined to bring the matter to a close without further delay. He dressed in haste and descended to the smoking-room, athirst for his nephew's blood. He found it empty, and his sense of equity compelled him to admit that Sir Richard could hardly be blamed for

unpunctuality as yet: after all, he couldn't have had a very long night.

He strolled over to the book-case: last night had revealed to him the position of the atlas, though he had not dared to consult it openly: there could be no harm in ascertaining the position of Masulipatam, though he was firmly determined that his connection with that abhorred city must be brought to a summary close. The index said *Gi*, and he felt a thrill of illogical self-satisfaction on finding that the district indicated lay well up in the mountains: his triumph was as brief as it was undeserved: research in the map showed no such place: a second recourse to the index showed that he had misread the letters *Gi* and the horrid truth was soon revealed that Masulipatam lay indubitably, almost impudently, upon the coast. Mr. Walton shut up the atlas with a bang, the sense of unmerited grievance strong upon him.

It is the nature of a sense of grievance to corrupt even the most equitable mind: how often had Mr. Walton in old days—even the day before yesterday—complained of the lack of attention to the opinion of their elders shown by the younger generation! His

complaints were now of a very different order. "Confound that young Ranby!" he muttered; "he's sure to remember what I said: just look how he caught me up over that infernal Bang! I wish to goodness these young men wouldn't hang upon my words like this. It seems as if I can't open my lips without being taken for an oracle."

"Good-morning, Mr. Walton," said a voice behind him. He looked up: there stood the very young man whose ill-timed courtesy he had been upbraiding: he grunted out a rather surly greeting. Lord Ranby was not offended.

"I see you've got the map there," he went on with unimpaired good humour. "I wonder if you'd show me just where your district is: my brother-in-law's just gone out to govern Madras—I think I told you—and he'll be interested to hear we've been talking about Indian affairs. I hope you won't mind my saying I thought the Archdeacon was jolly rude last night: he didn't seem to believe anything you said. Rather cheek, I thought, when he's never been near the place, and you've lived there all your life."

Various emotions surged through Mr. Walton's mind as he listened to this ingenu-

ous speech. He had started the morning, as we know, with some prejudice against Ranby, but his sense of justice, never far from the surface, was beginning to tell him that his irritation was unfair. After all, Ranby had only believed him too implicitly, and that was hardly a crime. What he said about the Archdeacon was as balm to the bruised soul of the brewer. He felt the stirrings of an almost paternal affection for this young clergyman, so unclerical in his shooting coat, so certain (if opportunity served) to agree with him about the enormities of the neo-Catholics. A wave of honesty swept him off his feet: his promise to Dick was for the moment forgotten.

"Look here, Mr. Ranby," he said, "I've got an apology to make to you: the fact is I'm not an Indian Civilian at all: I've never been near the place! I'm a brewer, and not ashamed of it either," he went on hotly. "It was that young ass of a nephew of mine who started that other story to try and keep Mrs. Branson quiet—and a rare lot of good it's done too! I was fool enough to agree, just to keep him out of trouble, but I see now it was a silly thing to do. I'd no business to be telling a pack of lies, and your believing

them makes it all the worse. It's been a lesson to me, and I can only say I beg your pardon. Of course, a clergyman like you can't be expected to think it's a very good story, I know, but anyhow that's the truth, and I'm uncommonly glad to have told it at last." And Mr. Walton blew his nose with some emotion.

The effect of his communication surprised him: he had expected annoyance, and was prepared to allow that it was not unnatural, but he was not prepared, and was indeed a little offended, to see Mr. Ranby sink into a chair convulsed with merriment, and laugh until the tears ran down his cheeks.

"I've no doubt it seems very funny to you," he said a little huffily, "but I assure you it's not been very pleasant to me: perhaps I shall see the humour of it later on."

Mr. Ranby pulled himself together. "It's not that, Mr. Walton," he gasped, still struggling with his emotions, "please don't think I was laughing at *you!* I think you've behaved simply splendidly and old Dick ought to be shot for putting you in such a hole. The fact is," he went on, with another spasm of laughter, "the fact is we're both in the same boat and it's I who ought to

be apologising. You see, I'm not a parson either!"

"Then what the deuce are you?" asked Mr. Walton, still a little ruffled; "didn't I hear you say——"

"Oh yes, of course I said it, but it wasn't true any more than your yarn about India—and Bang and Ghi. Oh Lord!" and the young gentleman collapsed once more. He steadied himself. "You see, sir, the fact is I'm Peter Ranby, not Paul, and when I heard that old brute in the train abusing Paul I thought I'd pretend it was me just for a lark—and then when I found you were coming on here I had to stick to it—and I had to steal the Archdeacon's waistcoat and talk about the Potteries till I'm sick to death of the whole business!"

Mr. Walton's brain was working rapidly. "Then you're not a teetotaller?" he asked, his mind fastening on an unimportant detail, "and you *did* order a gin and ginger at Shrewsbury?"

"Of course I'm not," said Peter, "and I can tell you it went to my heart last night having to drink that barley water just because I knew you'd got your eye on me."

The thought of the sufferings of which he

had been the innocent cause broke down the last feeling of resentment in the brewer's mind. "Upon my word," he said, smiling, "there doesn't seem to be much to choose between us: we might call that hole halved, I think."

"Faulty approach from a good lie and both players in the rough," said Ranby, "but by Jove, we're both of us in the hole now! I wonder how we're to get out of it."

"Well, I don't mind telling you," said Mr. Walton, "that I made an appointment with my nephew here this morning to tell him I simply couldn't go on."

Lord Ranby laughed again. "That's good," he said; "why, I made an appointment with him too! I sent him a line last night to tell him I'd had to pretend to be Paul, and to ask him to fix up what was to happen next."

"Well, I recommend you," said Mr. Walton, "to make a clean cut as I'm going to do."

His companion meditated. "There are one or two difficulties," he said at last. "There's bound to be an awful row: Mrs. Branson and the Archdeacon are pretty sure to cut up rough if they find we've been fooling them—

and then there's Lapski—not that he matters much."

"I'm not so sure," replied Mr. Walton; "I rather fancy from something my niece said last night that he's got a suspicion already: I can't say I like the fellow's looks."

"We must ask Dick about him," said Lord Ranby; "you know I think the best thing we can do is just to wait for Dick and have it all out with him. He's bound to be here soon and we've still got a few minutes before breakfast. By Jove, here he is!" he added, and in fact at that moment Sir Richard appeared in the smoking-room.

"Good-morning, Uncle Bob!" he said; "good-morning, Ranby! I'm awfully sorry to have behaved so badly yesterday. I simply couldn't help it. If you knew all I'd been through at my meeting I tell you you'd be sorry for me! Three solid hours of answering questions on subjects I knew nothing about! You've no idea what a strain it is!"

"Oh, haven't we?" said his uncle grimly. "I fancy Lord Ranby and I could tell you something on that subject. Yes, that's all right," he added, noticing his nephew's glance at Peter, "I know who Lord Ranby is, and what's more he knows who I am, and

the whole house is going to know it directly. I tell you, as I said in my letter, I'm simply sick to death of all this imposture. I'm going to go straight to Mrs. Branson and tell her right out that I'm a——"

The word died on his lips; he was looking towards the window, and Sir Richard, following his gaze, saw the melancholy face of Lapski peering into the room. The window opened to the ground and he stepped inside.

"You seek Mrs. Branson?" he said; "I see her, it is but a moment—in the room of breakfast: it is so you call him, yes? Ah, Sir Richard, you are come back?" He advanced and shook his host warmly by the hand. "Yes," he went on, "she has what you call the force of character! Last night she speak to me, it is two, three hours, of her husband: she wishes that I make him speak to her. I am silent but she asks it much, she weeps on my arm—and so when now I see her come into the room I pass out into the free air that I may think at peace. Her husband will speak, it may be—but before breakfast, no! it is not the time!"

He ceased with a melancholy shake of the head and fixed his inscrutable eyes upon his host.

"My dear Professor," said Sir Richard, "I quite understand: I'll tell her she must wait a bit. Ah, here's Mrs. Howard: I'll tell her she must keep Mrs. Branson quiet for a bit." As he spoke he ushered Lapski to the window again, whispering in his ear as he got him outside, "Sorry, old chap! we'll get a word together after breakfast."

He returned to greet Lady Mary, who was saluting her two other guests. "Good-morning, Alice! I got back as soon as I could, but I'm afraid I've been a shocking host so far. Look here, will you go in and begin breakfast? I'm told Mrs. Branson's there. I've got to fix up one or two things with Uncle Bob and Ranby about to-day's shoot. Through the window's your quickest way: you'll find the Professor just ahead."

As she passed out he murmured, in answer to the mute question on her face, "After breakfast! I'll come and fetch you in the drawing-room."

CHAPTER VIII

AN UNHOLY ALLIANCE

Our better part remains
To work in close design, by fraud or guile.
MILTON.

SIR RICHARD turned back into the room to face the indignant Mr. Walton, whose nerves were still quivering with the shock of Lapski's unexpected apparition. His nephew realised that he had a difficult game to play, but he was, as has been indicated, an optimist, and he did not despair of establishing a *modus vivendi*. There would not be time for a complete readjustment before breakfast, and he counted, not without reason, on hunger as an argument which would curtail the discussion. If only he could persuade Uncle Bob to postpone his exposure for a few hours, something might turn up, and it was to secure this object that he devoted his efforts.

"My dear Uncle Bob," he began, "I can't tell you how sorry I am! If I'd dreamt it would mean so much bother for you I'd never have suggested it for a moment. I quite see how stupid it was of me."

Mr. Walton was not to be mollified. "Stupid!" he retorted; "of course it was stupid! You might have known that Archdeacon was a perfect fiend at asking questions. Didn't you say he's been a schoolmaster? Well, it's all very well badgering little boys, but I'm too old to like it, and I tell you I won't stand it!"

"Yes, I'm bound to say, Dick," put in Ranby, "the Archdeacon was fearfully down on Mr. Walton last night: I was just saying I couldn't think how he managed to keep his temper. I can't think how he came to have such a nice daughter—it's a precious sight more than he deserves. She plays an uncommon good game of bridge, sir, didn't you think?" he added to Mr. Walton, in the hope of diverting his thoughts.

"Oh yes, I've nothing against *her*," conceded the brewer, "but then there's Mrs. Branson! I quite see you thought I shouldn't like to have her attacking me direct, but I'm blest if it wouldn't be better than

these continual innuendoes. And I've let myself in for being an expert about all sorts of native drinks too. Now beer I do know something about, but when it comes to Ghi——"

"Bang," put in Peter.

"Well Ghi or Bang, or whatever it's called, I'm as ignorant as the babe unborn!"

"You kept your end up awfully well, I thought, sir," said Peter, who had realised that Dick's object was to soothe his uncle, and was playing to his lead with ready loyalty.

"Well, I didn't give myself away altogether," said Mr. Walton, yielding to flattery, "but the strain was something fearful."

Sir Richard thought that the auspicious moment had arrived. "Well, look here," he said, "I'm making you awfully late for breakfast and we really can't settle things up before then. What I suggest is this: you and Ranby know all about one another now: (by the way, Peter, I want to hear your yarn soon and how you got into your own particular mess)! As I was saying, you and Ranby know all about one another, and I know Peter'll back you up for all he's worth —and I shall be there too in case anything goes wrong. Don't you think you could

just keep it up for a bit longer, and you see we shall be out shooting all day, so that Mrs. Branson and Lapski will be out of the way—he doesn't shoot, you know—and Peter and I'll manage the Archdeacon between us. I should be most awfully grateful, and just think what a hole Alice and I will be in if you give the thing away! I know it's an awful lot to ask after the way I've let you down already, but I can't tell you how grateful I should be if you could possibly manage to do it."

Mr. Walton wavered: the pangs of hunger were beginning to assert themselves, and reinforced distaste for what must clearly be an unpleasant scene and his very genuine liking for his penitent nephew. Ranby saw his hesitation and gave the final impetus.

"Oh come along, Mr. Walton," he said, "let's give old Dick a run for his money: you mustn't desert me either if it comes to that, and I can't possibly own up now, whatever you do. You can trust me to play up to your lead if you give me half a chance, we'll be even with that old Archdeacon yet, and then we can have a real good talk when we get in this afternoon and settle the whole business up."

Mr. Walton had hesitated, the old proverb was fulfilled, and he was lost. It is sweet to have a companion in duplicity as in sorrow, and Lord Ranby's appeal had touched his chivalrous heart. He yielded, and the baronet, with a sigh of unfeigned relief, shepherded his two guests into the breakfast room.

On entering the breakfast room, Sir Richard, after greeting his other guests, devoted himself to Miss Branson: Lord Ranby found a vacant place by Miss Montford, and Mr. Walton, already cursing the perfidy of his new allies, found himself compelled to sit next the Archdeacon. His worst forebodings were quickly fulfilled.

"I was so much interested, Mr. Walton," said his neighbour, "in our little discussion last night that I should greatly like to continue it. But I have a confession to make! You Anglo-Indians never quite realise the depth of our English ignorance, and you'll laugh when I tell you that when I heard you mention Masulipatam I had no idea where it was."

Mr. Walton was far from laughter, but he murmured an unintelligible response.

"I know it's disgraceful," went on his

tormentor playfully, "but I'm bound to confess I had to look it up in the map."

Mr. Walton gave a grunt which was accepted by the Archdeacon as one of amused surprise: it really conveyed his disgust at the indecently plentiful supply of atlases in the house.

"And then of course I realised, what I ought to have known all along, that it's in the diocese of Madras. And that brings me to my point," he concluded, tapping his finger on the table ("an infuriating trick" thought Mr. Walton). "The Bishop of Madras was over here quite recently, and he certainly gave us to understand that the standard of temperance among natives in his diocese was remarkably high. That looks as if things had changed considerably for the better of late: let me see, how long did you say you had been at home?"

The long-suffering Mr. Walton glanced round for assistance: was he never to have a meal in peace without the nauseous trail of Bang thrown over it? Sir Richard was listening ardently to Miss Diana: it was clear that no help was to be expected from that quarter. "That just comes of trusting my young fool of a nephew," thought his

uncle savagely: he turned to face the Archdeacon, when a voice from across the table fell like balm on his troubled ear.

"I think I can explain that," said Lord Ranby, "my brother-in-law, Fitzherbert, has just gone out as Governor of Madras and he's written us a very full account of his troubles there. He's a wonderful letter writer, and I was much struck with what he said about the two divisions of the Presidency. It appears that down in the plains the people are as sober as can be—just as you, sir, were saying," he went on turning to the Archdeacon, "but up in the hills they're regular demons for drink. They make it, I understand, by water power: little cascades down from the mountains: each little village has its own little cascade and its own little Bang factory (he calls it Bang," he explained apologetically to Mr. Walton, "but of course every one knows they're two names for the same thing), and there they live getting as drunk as lords. It's a disgusting sight according to Charles Fitzherbert, perfectly disgusting—but it quite bears out what Mr. Walton was saying last night."

Mr. Walton's countenance beamed with delight: he resumed his breakfast with

renewed appetite. The Archdeacon was silenced, though not entirely convinced: he did not approve of Mr. Ranby nor of the trace of levity in his handling of the subject, but Lord Fitzherbert's evidence was undeniable, and the frank and open countenance of the young clergyman disarmed scepticism. Seeking a more congenial atmosphere he turned to Mrs. Branson.

"I do hope, Mrs. Branson, that before you leave this country you will find time to see something of our temperance work in the North: we flatter ourselves that we have a good deal to teach the South of England—and even the Midlands," he added, with a glance at the unconscious Ranby.

"Well, I do think that is just too sweet of you," responded Mrs. Branson, "and I should just love to see those old dilapidations you were talking of last night: they must be too cute for anything."

The Archdeacon gave a slight shiver: he had not realised how strange an interpretation the familiar word might bear.

"But I'm afraid," went on Mrs. Branson, unconscious of the pain she had caused, "I can't get there this fall: I have to go right back to the States the end of this week:

I've taken my berth on the *Carmania* and I have to be in Chicago for a great rally of Freedom's Eldest Daughters on the 14th. I told Sir Richard it was just all I could do to get here, but I wouldn't have missed it for the world. I just love this old English country life, and I think you gentlemen do look too sweet for words in those natty little knickerbockers."

A slight blush rose to the Archdeacon's face: he had a good leg, and had secretly welcomed his promotion to his present office for personal as well as professional reasons.

"I do hope you aren't taking your daughter with you," said Lady Mary: "it is too bad to take her away just when she is beginning to see something of England. You can't count London in the season as being really England, you know!"

"Well, no," answered Mrs. Branson, "Diana is going to stop over for a few weeks with some real charming folk we met in Paris last fall. They're going to bring her back with them in November."

"That's right," said Lady Mary heartily, "I wish I could persuade her to visit us in London—or no, I'm afraid we shall be in Norfolk," she added with a pang of recollection.

"Yes, I should have loved her to see that sweet little Evelyn of yours," said Mrs. Branson sentimentally, "and that other poor little Evelyn too," she added, sighing. "I can't tell you how touched I was with all you told me last night. I tell you I just wept over it when I was going to bed; didn't I, Diana? The poor little mite!"

Lady Mary glanced at Uncle Bob, but he was making up for lost time with his breakfast, and seemed to have heard nothing.

"Thank you, thank you, dear Mrs. Branson," she said, "but now, if Uncle Bob will forgive us, I think we ought to desert him: I've got to settle about luncheon for the shooters. You'll look in on me in the drawing-room before you start, won't you, Dick?"

The ladies withdrew, and Lapski, who had been waiting for his opportunity, nodded unobserved to Sir Richard, in the direction of the garden. He joined him there in a few minutes and the pair strolled out of sight of the house.

"Smiler, old man," cried the baronet, clapping his friend on the back, "you *are* a great man! I shouldn't have believed any one could have done so splendidly. That wig of yours is perfect, and you simply give

me the creeps to look at. I tell you you've absolutely put the wind up Uncle Bob and Peter! They're scared to death of your finding them out: by the way, did you know that's Peter and not Paul? They seem to have got mixed somehow: I haven't had time to find out how. And Mary too! She wrote me a letter to say you half frightened her out of her wits. You must have had a magnificent evening. Svengali's not in it with you: you ought to stick to this line, old chap—it suits you down to the ground!"

But Sir Richard's eulogies woke no answering response in England's countenance. "It's all very well," he growled, "the better one does this sort of job the more infernal idiot one looks. It's all very well for you, Dick, but how'd you like Miss Branson to see you dressed up as a German Jew or Charlie Chaplin or Jack Johnson, and have every one saying they'd never know you apart?" He snorted angrily.

"Oh well," Sir Richard began, "of course there are limits, and if you had the good taste to be in love with Miss Branson things would be a bit different."

England snorted again: his perturbation was so obvious that Dick's perceptions were

aroused. He cast a quick glance at the Professor's moody face: "My word," he thought to himself, "I wonder if that can be it? that would explain his making such a point of my not giving him away, and he did say he'd met Mary once or twice. Poor old Tommy! It *is* a bit rough on him if that's what's up." They paced up and down in silence for a few minutes before the Captain resumed.

"Then there's Mrs. B. My word, Dick, you'll have a Tartar of a mother-in-law if you ever get so far! She's absolutely bent on having some words with the late Branson: she was at me for two mortal hours last night. I've fobbed her off so far, said Monday was an off day with the spirits, sort of early closing business or words to that effect: but she'll have me in the end, and then I've either got to run for it or rouse old Branson from the tomb—and I simply don't think it can be done with the instruments to hand. That's what I wanted to ask you about: what do you want me to do?"

Sir Richard pondered deeply. "It's jolly hard to say," he answered at last. "I think I'd better try and get some pointers out of his daughter in case we have to bring the old

man on, but I'm like you, and I'd a lot rather let the sleeping Bransons lie. It *may* be necessary in the end, but we must just live from hand to mouth a bit longer."

"That's all very well for you," grumbled England, "I find a lot of things put in my mouth that I've no sort of use for."

"I see, Tommy, I really do see, old man," said his friend sympathetically. "I know it's a lonely furrow and a long trail and all that, but you must just keep it up a bit longer. The fact is, I'm just playing for time as Napoleon or Paderewski or one of those continental fellows said. 'Ask me for anything but time,' that's it—and it's time I want—and by Jove, that reminds me, I've got to see Mary before we go out. Stick to it, old man, for my sake and keep smiling! I'll see you again this evening."

The baronet hurried off, meditating as he went on the new complication introduced into the situation by the unexpected glimpse he fancied he had had into England's feelings for Lady Mary. "Good old Smiler," he thought, "that would be first rate: he's a real sahib if ever there was one! I wonder if Mary —well, she might do a jolly sight worse!"

It may have been the personal turn thus

given to his reflections: it may have been elation at the successful issue of his negotiations with his aggrieved friends: it may have been simple carelessness: it may have been a just Fate, determined that he should share some of the tribulations which he had brought on others—but, whatever the cause may have been, the fact remains that, on arriving under the drawing-room window, Sir Richard called out cheerfully, "Mary, are you ready?" There was no response: he called again, "Mary!" putting his head in at the window as he spoke. The vision which met his eyes dismayed him: he saw Lady Mary's head turned towards him with a look in which reproach and dismay were mingled: he saw Mrs. Branson raise her head from her book and glance curiously in his direction. The world reeled about him: neither his Uncle Bob nor England could have desired a more poetic revenge: he had fallen, as the Psalmist long ago trusted that his enemy might fall, into the destruction he had made for others. There was a ghastly moment during which thoughts of flight jostled in his brain with visions of a complete confession, and then suddenly salvation dawned. A window

above was thrown open and a voice said in modest tones:

"Is that you, Sir Richard? did you want me?"

For a moment the dismayed baronet felt that the end of the world was upon him: then he realised with incredulous joy the rope which fortune had flung to him.

"Oh, Miss Montford," he said, "I was wondering if you'd care to come and see the stables before we start? I think there's just time."

"Oh thank you," said the delighted young lady, "I'll be down in a moment: I simply love looking at horses."

The window closed, Sir Richard glanced into the drawing-room again: Mrs. Branson had resumed her book: of Lady Mary the back only was to be seen as she bent over the writing-table. Nothing but a slight heaving of the shoulders, as of one struggling with some uncontrollable emotion, betrayed the crisis that had been passed.

Miss Montford joined her host and they walked off in the direction of the stables.

"I do hope, Miss Montford," said Sir Richard, "that you didn't mind my calling you by your Christian name: the fact is we

all got into the way of it at Eton. Shocking bad manners, I'm afraid, but you know what young brutes boys are—and if you won't mind my saying so, I think Mary Montford such a pretty name! It just slipped out before I knew what I was saying."

Miss Montford smiled forgiveness and they went on their way. The path was a narrow one and Sir Richard stepped aside to let her precede him: he mopped his brow stealthily. "My word, that was a near thing!" he thought to himself, "I begin to see what Uncle Bob was driving at!"

CHAPTER IX

RUSSIAN SCANDAL

Strange fits of passion I have known.
WORDSWORTH.

THE morning's shoot was an undeniable success. Birds were plentiful: the Archdeacon justified his reputation as a shot: Mr. Walton had plenty of shooting and was satisfied with his bag: Dick and Peter kept the two well separated and guarded against any possible breaches of the peace, but their task was a light one, for Archdeacon Montford was in too good a humour to provoke hostilities. As they drew near to the farmhouse where they were to lunch, they observed with some surprise a motor drawn up outside: it had been no part of the programme that the ladies should join them, and even Dick's desire for the presence of Diana did not prevent him from swearing gently under his breath. The absence of strain during the

last few hours was not a thing to be lightly surrendered. Lady Mary came out as they arrived.

"Oh, Dick," she said, "I do hope you won't mind: it was such a lovely morning and we thought it a pity to waste it." She led him aside for a moment. "The fact is," she whispered, "I've been simply at my wit's end to keep Mrs. Branson off the poor Professor. He's been so nice and pathetic, and he practically threw himself on my mercy: do you know, Dick, I'm getting quite to like him in spite of his being so queer! He's been talking to me about the East, and you know even in his queer broken English, it's quite thrilling! How did you come across him? You must tell me all about him some time."

Sir Richard was mollified: after all he felt that he owed England a good turn, and probably it would be easy to keep the party off large topics at luncheon. "All right, old girl," he said, "the only thing is that you simply *must* take on the Archdeacon: I'll tackle Mrs. B., but after a dose of her I feel I know what old Tennyson meant when he said he wanted 'the sound of a voice that was still.' But come on, let's make the best of it!"

The luncheon party justified Sir Richard's optimism: the Archdeacon entertained Lady Mary with an account of the morning's sport: Mr. Walton improved his acquaintance with Diana, while Ranby flirted cheerfully with Miss Montford. The Professor gazed on the company with something approaching benevolence. The host, as he had foreseen, had the heaviest task, and he felt that he was merely receiving the due reward of virtue when, after luncheon, he saw Mrs. Branson lead Mr. Walton into the farmhouse garden. "After all, he's had an easy morning," he thought, "and it'll steady him a bit: and now for a word or two with Diana."

Mrs. Branson's opening remarks caused the brewer no uneasiness. "I think that niece of yours is just too sweet to live," she said, "it don't seem right somehow that a young thing like that should have the sorrows of the world on her shoulders."

It had never occurred to Mr. Walton to regard his niece in this light, but he felt that there could be no harm in assenting to so general a proposition.

"I call it fine the way she looks after that little boy," she went on. Nothing special in Mrs. Howard's dealings with her son had

been brought to her uncle's notice, but he agreed that she was an admirable mother.

"The thought of those two little Evelyns playing about together fetches me all the time," said Mrs. Branson. Mr. Walton felt that he was going deeper and deeper: surely Alice could not have been such a fool as to give both her children the same name? He contented himself with an unintelligible murmur.

"When I think of the shadow of that wicked woman thrown across that young life I just want to sit down and cry," continued the warm-hearted lady: "it don't seem right that such creatures should live."

The sudden introduction of a new and apparently vicious personality into the home circle of the Howards was a disagreeable surprise to Mr. Walton: he felt that he must say something and advanced the proposition that she might not perhaps be as black as she was painted. ("I wish to goodness I knew who she was though!" he added to himself.)

Mrs. Branson stopped in the middle of the path, which was separated here by a yew hedge from the lawn. "There is nothing I admire more," she said with deliberation,

"than the chivalrous defence of a weak woman by a good man, and I can see, Mr. Walton, that you're a real good man: but how she could have done it I do not know."

Mr. Walton was more mystified than ever, but he thought himself safe in inquiring to which particular part of her conduct Mrs. Branson was referring. So desperate a character, he reflected, could hardly have limited herself to one atrocity.

"Why, leaving that poor little Evelyn," answered Mrs. Branson. "I tell you it makes me feel bad even to think of it. Such a cute little fellow as he looks, too!"

She drew out her pocket handkerchief and blew her nose. Mr. Walton pressed his hand to his head: had he taken leave of his senses? surely a moment ago he had heard Mrs. Howard's care for her boy extolled as a pattern to mothers, and now it appeared that he had been shamelessly neglected: by whom, if not by his mother? "It must be the nurse," he suddenly thought, blaming himself for his obtuseness: "Alice must have been complaining about some careless nurse they've had, and she thinks I know all about it." Satisfied with his solution, he went on

boldly: "Yes, it was a very bad business: I expect drink was at the bottom of it."

Mrs. Branson leapt at the suggestion. "And that's only too probable," she said, "but what Mr. Howard could ever have seen in her I'm sure I don't know."

"Oh, I don't suppose Mr. Howard had much to do with the engagement," he said: "his wife probably saw to that."

This added detail in the portrait of the first Mrs. Howard fitted admirably with Mrs. Branson's conception of her character.

"Ah, she was a managing woman, I daresay," she said. "And it must have been a relief to him in some ways when she went off. But nothing can make a divorce court a very agreeable place, and I'm real sorry for poor Mr. Howard. He got his decree easy, I take it?"

Mr. Walton made no answer: his companion glanced at him and saw to her dismay that he appeared to be in the incipient stages of an apoplectic fit: his face was scarlet and his eyes rolled wildly in his head.

"Say, Mr. Walton," she cried, "I'd no idea you felt that bad about it. I know over here you take these things harder than we

do, and I'm not saying you're not right. I oughtn't to have said a word——"

Mr. Walton had regained his power of speech. "Divorce!" he cried; "I must tell you, Mrs. Branson——"

What revelations the brewer might have made will never be exactly known, for at that precise moment there came from behind the yew hedge the unmistakable groaning of a human creature in pain. They both looked anxiously through the branches, and could make out the form of Professor Lapski prostrate on a garden seat. He writhed from side to side in agony, and as he writhed he uttered the groans which had first attracted their attention. By and by the writhing ceased and the groans became more articulate.

"Ah, no, no!" he half sobbed out; "it cannot be! have pity on me! I will come, I will come! But not now! spare me yet a little while! I have been faithless, yes, but I will obey: speak, for I listen."

He paused, as though listening to an unseen speaker: the answer apparently came, for he went on in more subdued tones: "It is good—to-night I will see, to-night I will hear! You shall not speak in vain. My will, it is yours. I will be the eye, the ear,

the pen! Lapski, he shall be no more, he surrenders himself to your will. To-night, to-night!" The words died away into an inarticulate murmur and the Professor's head sank on his breast, though his shoulders continued to heave in spasmodic jerks.

His unseen audience were deeply impressed by what they had heard and seen.

"I guess all we can do is just to leave him," whispered Mrs. Branson; "they do say it's dangerous to rouse them when they're in the power of the spirits."

They tiptoed in silence back to the farm: as they reached the door, Mrs. Branson turned to her companion and said in a tone of awe, "Mr. Walton, that is a *very* remarkable young man." Mr. Walton agreed: he had at any rate been rescued from a difficult situation, and, though he still bore Lapski a grudge for his preternaturally sensitive nose, he was inclined to be grateful.

The "very remarkable young man" listtened to the sound of their retreating footsteps: when they were at a safe distance he sat up. "By Jove, that was a near thing!" he said to himself; "I don't know what Lady Mary's been saying, but Uncle Bob would have blown the whole concern sky

high in another minute! I think I've earned a cigarette." He lit one and smoked it with philosophic content, though keeping his ears open for any other intrusion upon his solitude.

Sir Richard's hopes for a few quiet minutes with Diana were destined to be frustrated. As he was on his way to her side he was buttonholed by the Archdeacon. "I should rather like a word with you, Atherton," he said, "if you could spare a moment." There was nothing for it but to assent, and they strolled out in front of the house. On their way they passed Lord Ranby and Miss Montford sitting on a garden seat, and engaged apparently in intimate conversation.

The Archdeacon gave a slight sniff. "It's about that young Ranby," he said, "I wanted to ask you what sort of a fellow he is. I've met his elder brother several times and took quite a fancy to him, but this one seems of rather a different type."

"Oh, I assure you you're quite mistaken," said Sir Richard with conviction, "they're far more like than you think—Paul's one of the best of fellows and I'm told he's doing awfully well in the Potteries."

"I am glad to hear it, very glad," said the Archdeacon gloomily. "I confess that from the slight amount of conversation that I have had with him I felt some doubt whether he took his vocation very seriously. I was talking to him of my old friend Canon Dawkins, who has been doing a wonderful work, a very wonderful work, in that district for some years and was surprised to find how little he seemed to know of him. I should have thought that any young clergyman would have been only too glad to learn from Dawkins, for with all his quaint ways he is a real power for good—a very real power."

Sir Richard was rather at a loss for a defence of his friend's neglect of Canon Dawkins. "I fancy," he said, "he's been kept pretty hard at work in his own parish: I'm told the men there think the world of him."

"I am delighted to hear it," said the Archdeacon, more gloomily than ever. "I am bound to say that I have noticed a certain levity, not to say frivolity, in his manner which would not commend itself to our hard-headed men in the North, but in the Potteries no doubt things are different. We mustn't all be of one pattern: it takes all

sorts to make a world!" he ended with a cheerless laugh.

They strolled in silence for a few moments: the Archdeacon had a delicate subject to broach, and was considering the best method to employ.

"He is singularly like his brother in face," he began.

"A marvellous likeness," agreed his host readily.

"I can imagine that that must sometimes be a temptation to him: I remember, as I daresay you do, Atherton, considerable trouble which we had with two twin brothers at Eton: there was one who was comparatively insensible to pain, and the other was a very rapid writer, while their handwritings were indistinguishable. It became very difficult in that case, I remember, to make sure that punishment was adequate, or indeed wholly just—very difficult indeed."

Sir Richard had a lively recollection of the pair of brothers and could indeed have added details to the picture, but he contented himself with murmuring assent.

"Now it has occurred to me," went on the Archdeacon, "that this young Ranby may also trade occasionally on his likeness to his

brother——" Sir Richard started: for a moment he feared that Peter was detected, but a glance at his companion reassured him.

"For example, young Lord Ranby paid considerable attention to my daughter Mary while she was staying with her aunt this summer. I don't say, of course, that there was anything in it, but she certainly saw a good deal of him and I thought she liked him. Now I think you will see my point. Is it not just possible that his younger brother may be tempted to trade on his likeness to him, and that, without knowing it, we may be conniving at an injury to Lord Ranby? You see what I mean."

Sir Richard saw it very clearly—perhaps more clearly than the Archdeacon entirely realised. For his daughter to marry Lord Ranby was one thing: an engagement with his younger brother was something very different: and it was not necessary to credit the worthy Archdeacon with none but worldly motives: Dick could hardly blame him for thinking Peter a peculiar type of clergyman, and one hardly likely to shine in his profession. It was impossible, for instance, to think of him in gaiters—at least in gaiters of any colour than the rather aggressively

lay ones which he was wearing at the moment. Fortunately the baronet saw for once a clear path before him.

"I quite see your point," he said earnestly, "but I can assure you, Archdeacon, that you have nothing to fear. Ranby is the soul of honour, and I can conceive nothing more unlikely than that he would ever do or say anything that could by any possibility injure or offend his elder brother. You may take that as absolutely certain. Still, if you like, I will have a word with him: it would be perfectly easy for me to give him a hint without any chance of his taking offence. And now I expect it's time that we were off again: I hope we shall find birds as plentiful this afternoon."

They turned towards the house: Dick was congratulating himself on the ease (and indeed veracity) with which he had extricated himself; but he was destined to be put to a severer test.

"One other thing, Atherton," said the Archdeacon, detaining him, "Mrs. Branson has been telling me something of the tragedy of your sister's married life. You will forgive my asking you, I know: I admire Mrs. Howard, and am grateful for all her kindness

to Mary, but this story has come as something of a shock to me. I cannot imagine how I had never heard it. I suppose I may take it from you that Mr. Howard was what is technically known as the innocent party?"

Sir Richard's heart had nearly stopped beating: he had had no chance of learning precisely to what extent Lady Mary had committed herself: but he realised with a great joy that the form of the Archdeacon's question gave him an easy gambit.

"You may take it from me," he said slowly and with great emphasis, "you may take it from me, Archdeacon, that George Howard is as innocent as the babe unborn."

The Archdeacon was visibly impressed: he murmured a word of thanks, and they returned to the farmhouse.

"Good old Truth," murmured the baronet to himself, "stranger, they say, than Fiction —and a jolly sight more convincing! I do wish one could tell it oftener!"

There was still time for a few minutes with Diana, and the ardent baronet hastened to her side. Miss Branson was dressed—well, it is enough perhaps to say that Molyneux of Paris (if indeed Lady Mary was right in her conjecture as to the creator of her

evening gown) had found a worthy successor in Curtis for the labours of the morning, and that, even had the impossible happened and his judgment failed, Sir Richard would have thought the result delightful.

"I've been trying to get a word with you all the morning, Miss Branson," he said, "but the Archdeacon had some business he wanted to discuss and I couldn't get away. I do hope you haven't been bored with this rather primitive entertainment!"

Miss Branson's voice was clear and sweet, Miss Branson's articulation was perfect: it seemed at least to her infatuated host that he had never heard his native language so adequately spoken.

"I've enjoyed myself enormously," she answered, "and I'm so glad to have had the chance of a talk with your uncle—what an old dear he is!"

Sir Richard agreed heartily, as he would indeed have assented to a far more disputable proposition.

"It's wonderful how he keeps his spirits up," went on Miss Branson; "I'm afraid from what mamma tells me he must have had a very hard time in India."

Sir Richard was uncertain to what dis-

asters his uncle might have confessed, but he assented to the proposition in the vague form that he was "a very fine old boy."

"Mr. Ranby told me last night," continued Miss Branson, "that he didn't seem to like talking about India, but he didn't know why. I hope nothing very sad happened to him out there? Of course I was very careful to keep off the subject, but sometimes at dinner when I was looking at him I thought his face looked so anxious and sad: I couldn't help feeling sorry for him."

Sir Richard was able to guess at some of the causes of his uncle's distress, but was in no position to reveal them.

"Yes, poor old Uncle Bob," he answered shamelessly, "I'm afraid he's had a very rough time: I only wish we could do anything to cheer him up."

"I'm afraid he must feel dreadfully lonely," went on Miss Branson, whose mother had dwelt feelingly to her on Mr. Walton's childless condition. "It's a real tragedy, for any one can see what an affectionate nature he's got."

Sir Richard gave a slight gasp. "Good Lord," he thought to himself. "What on

earth can Uncle Bob have been telling her?"

"Yes, it's a bad business," he murmured vaguely in reply.

The conversation was not developing as he had hoped, and it seemed necessary to bring it to a close.

"I should like to have a talk with you about it all," he went on, "and we must get some time this evening. But I'm afraid the Archdeacon will be getting restive if we don't get off again. I must take you back to Alice: I do hope she's looking after you properly?"

"I think she's delightful," said Miss Branson with emphasis, "and I've been so enjoying a talk with that queer old Professor. But do you know, Sir Richard, I sometimes wonder if he's quite what he pretends to be! I do wish you'd tell me some more about him?"

They had been strolling beside the yew hedge and a glimpse of Lapski on the seat gave the harassed baronet an excuse for retreat.

"Look out," he whispered, "I believe he's there! We must have a talk when I get back from shooting: you will give me a chance, won't you?"

Miss Branson smiled assent, and they rejoined the rest of the party. Sir Richard's meditations were of a mixed character. "She's a deuced smart girl," he said to himself with a chuckle, "I'm not sure I can keep it up with her much longer, and I'm sure I don't want to! But what on earth can old Uncle Bob have been saying? What can she mean by saying he's so lonely? He can't have told her he's divorced Aunt Elizabeth! No, that was Mary—and surely thay can't *both* have said it." And it was with a brow deeply puckered by thought that he led out the shooters for their afternoon's amusement.

CHAPTER X

FRESH ARRIVALS

Greet the unseen with a cheer.
BROWNING.

THE afternoon passed off without incident. On the way back to the house Sir Richard paired off with Ranby: he felt it safe to leave the Archdeacon and Mr. Walton together for they had discovered a surprising unanimity of sentiment on the subject of the vagaries of the extreme High Churchmen—a subject which seemed likely to last them well back to the Manor.

He described to Peter, with considerable picturesqueness of detail, his conversation with the Archdeacon after luncheon.

"You'll have to look out, old boy," he ended, "or you'll be cutting yourself out: the only decent thing for you to do is to sing your own praises. I never saw a case before where the only unselfish thing for a man to do was to exalt himself at the expense of his

own twin brother. It's a new discovery in morality and you'll be the crucial case quoted in all the text-books on moral philosophy!"

He was grieved to find that his humour found no response in Peter. That young gentleman walked on for some distance in silence and then he burst out:

"Look here, Dick! I'm jolly well fed up with this business! It's all very well for you to talk, but it's a bit thick to have to sit with your best girl and talk to her all the time about some one else. I've cracked up Peter Ranby till I tell you I'm absolutely sick of the subject, and the worst of it is I'm not at all sure she isn't getting sick of it too. Do you know, Dick, I'm not at all sure she isn't getting a bit fond of *me* now! She seems to want to talk a lot about the work in my parish, and I'm at my wits' end to know what to tell her. I can't see why one's brothers can't keep one a bit better posted up in all the things they do: I'm sure I've said things about the Mothers' Union and the Young Wives' Fellowship that would make 'em turn in their graves. And then where shall I be when she finds it isn't me—or rather I mean when she finds it *is* me only I've been saying

it wasn't? I've a good mind to own up straight away."

Sir Richard was wise enough not to urge the inconvenience to himself which might result from premature disclosure: after all, he was not responsible for Peter's assumption of his brother's personality, and it was a relief to contemplate an imbroglio which wasn't of his own contriving.

"I quite see, old man," he said, "and I wouldn't dream of asking you to go on with it to please me, but what about the Archdeacon? He won't enjoy thinking he's been made a fool of. I can't help hoping that if you wait a bit something will turn up."

"Oh, *something* will turn up right enough," retorted Peter; "the only question is, what? I'm afraid the whole blessed concern will be given away and then we shall all look a set of prize idiots."

"Of course there's no denying it's risky," answered his friend, "and I want you to play your own game just as you think best: all I ask is that you won't give anything away without telling me: we're much more likely to pull the thing off if we stick together."

"Right you are, old man," said Lord Ranby, "that's a bargain, but, mind you, I'm

pretty near breaking point, and another course of talk about old Dawkins will just finish me."

They dropped the subject and discussed the day's sport till they reached home, which they did rather in advance of the other couple. Wilson came out to meet them with a telegram.

"This has just come for you, sir," he said, handing it to Ranby.

He read it, and his jaw dropped.

"Any answer, sir?" asked Wilson.

"No, no answer," said Lord Ranby, and he handed it to his host; "I wish to heaven there was," he added under his breath.

Sir Richard read it:

Ranby, Manor, Drayworth. As no answer to letter coming self arriving 6.52 Drayworth tell Dick.—RANBY.

Sir Richard whistled: "My word!" he said, "that's a facer! What does it mean, Peter?"

"Mean?" said Peter; "well, it means the game's up: any one could see that."

"But why's Paul coming? I suppose it *is* Paul?"

"Oh, it's Paul right enough, but what he's

coming for I haven't the least idea. You see I'd been away from home for a day or two before I came here, and when I did this quick-change business it struck me that if I had letters forwarded it would give the whole show away, so I wired to stop them. And now all I can suppose is that old Paul wants to see me about something special, and as I didn't answer he must have telephoned home and got my address—and there you are! And here he'll be before you know where you are either," he ended lugubriously.

Sir Richard meditated for a moment.

"Well of course, you *might* simply exchange parts without saying anything about it," he said, "We should have to meet old Paul at the station and give him the tip, but I don't see why it shouldn't work."

Ranby shook his head.

"No, old man," he answered, "I thought of that, but I don't think it'd do. To begin with, it brings in another complication, and heaven knows we've had enough of them already. I'm sick of play-acting and I can't take on another part now, even if it's only pretending to be myself. My nerves are all upset anyhow as it is, and I should be sure to give the whole show away. And then I don't

think it's quite fair on Mary—Miss Montford, I mean. You see, if she's getting to like *me* at all she won't like to drop me, that's Paul, I mean, however nice I am myself—you see what I mean? And besides, she's quite likely to spot there's some hanky-panky and then where should I be? No, old man, you take my word for it, that cock won't fight!"

There was a pause. "Well, what about it?" he asked, as Sir Richard did not speak.

"It's what Sherlock used to call a three-pipe problem," said his host, "but we haven't got time for that. Let's see, it's about five now, and we've got a good hour. You go up and have a bath, old man, and then we'll have a council of war in the smoking-room. It's a mercy the Archdeacon doesn't smoke! Trust your Uncle Richard!" he added, clapping Peter on the shoulder.

"Uncle me no uncles!" said Lord Ranby, shaking himself free. "You'll have enough to do with looking after your own uncle from what I can see," he added, and with this Parthian shot he vanished into the house.

Sir Richard looked in the direction which Peter had indicated: there was no mistake

about it: his uncle was bearing down on him in a towering rage. What could have happened? Surely the Archdeacon couldn't have suddenly developed ritualistic tendencies? Had the conversation got out of hand and slipped back to India or to drink? He braced himself for the worst. It was not long in coming.

"Look here, Dick," cried his exasperated uncle, "this has got to end *now!* I told you I'd stand it for a few hours more and I've done it, but this is more than flesh and blood can bear. What's all this infernal nonsense about a divorce? Who's divorced who? Or are the people all mad? There was Mrs. Branson after luncheon took me aside and treated me to a lot of drivel about what a wonderful woman Alice was, and then she suddenly got off on to some story about a drunken nurse with whom George seemed to have got entangled—and she had the infernal impudence to ask me if he got a decree! I tell you I was just going to give her a piece of my mind when suddenly we heard that Professor of yours in some kind of a fit behind the hedge" ("Good old Smiler," thought Dick with a pang of gratitude) "yarning away to his spirits or something. So we

cleared out, and I've given Mrs. B. a pretty wide berth since, I can tell you.

"And that's not all of it. I'd been having quite a sensible talk with Montford about those ritualists—he's not quite such a fool as he looks, I'm bound to say—and then just as we were getting near the house he suddenly said how sad it was about George, and how you'd told him that he was the innocent party, and what a relief that was to his mind. I was just speechless, and perhaps that was as well—and we were quite close home, so it didn't matter. But look here, young man, I've had enough mystery to last me my lifetime and I insist on knowing where I am. What's all this story about a divorce? I've known George Howard since he was a child, and he'd have a fit at the idea! And a drunken nurse too! What's this new lie you've been starting? I'm bound to tell you I think it's very poor taste. It's bad enough filling the house with a lot of play-actors without dragging your sister's name into the divorce court."

Sir Richard's new discovery of the value of truth was to stand him in good stead.

"I promise you, Uncle Bob," he said, "I've had nothing to do with it. It was an

awful shock to me when the Archdeacon suddenly said he supposed George was innocent. I thought the best thing I could do was just to give him a clean bill of health and wait and ask Alice. I'm just as puzzled as you are about it. I haven't had a moment to see her yet, but I'll tell you as soon as I hear."

Mr. Walton could not but be moved by his nephew's genuine air of bewilderment.

"Well, the moral of the whole thing is that it's got to stop," he said, "and really I think the best thing I can do is to go straight back to London. I'm not as young as I was, and this kind of thing takes it out of me. I'm very grateful to you, Dick, and all that, and we've had a jolly day's sport, and I should have liked some more, but it's simply not good enough. I'll wire to your aunt to-night and go off the first thing to-morrow morning."

"Oh, look here, Uncle Bob," said his nephew, "I can't have you driven out of the house like this, especially when I feel it's all my stupid fault. Besides, you simply can't go. I've got a little surprise for you. I thought we should want some more guns and so I wired to Geoffrey and Walter and they're

coming here to-night: they get down by the 6.52. I didn't mean to tell you, for I thought it would be a joke to spring your sons on you at dinner. But you see you'll just have to stay now!"

The effect of this communication was surprising. Sir Richard knew how fond his uncle was of his two sons, and expected some demonstration of pleasure: instead he saw all the colour fade slowly out of Mr. Walton's face and something like a shudder run through his frame.

"What's the matter, Uncle Bob?" he cried; "you aren't ill, are you?"

"Good Lord," responded his uncle slowly, "well, you *have* done it now and no mistake! I told her I hadn't got any!"

"Any what? Told who?" inquired Sir Richard, thinking his uncle had taken leave of his senses.

"Mrs. Branson," replied the long-suffering man. "I told her I was childless: I said it was our great sorrow. I did it for the best, Heaven knows, but what *can* we do now?"

Sir Richard gave vent to a prolonged whistle. "So that's what Diana meant when

she said you were so lonely! I thought you'd been saying you'd divorced Aunt Elizabeth."

"What!" shouted the outraged brewer; "damn it all, Dick, this is getting beyond a joke! "I'm not going to have your aunt dragged into this infernal tomfoolery!"

"No, no, I promise you, Uncle Bob," said his nephew reassuringly. "I've never even mentioned her name, but Miss Branson said you were so lonely and I didn't know then you'd said you hadn't any children, so I thought——"

"I don't care what you thought," answered Mr. Walton, "the point is I've said I hadn't any children and they're both coming here in a couple of hours. What on earth can we do?"

The appalling nature of the difficulty was gradually dawning on Sir Richard, and for a moment even his optimism was smitten into silence: but he was the first to pull himself together.

"Well, look here, Uncle Bob," he said, "things are never as bad as they look beforehand. Something's safe to turn up. You go up and have a bath and then we'll have a regular council of war in the smoking-room."

He watched his uncle, a stricken man,

walk slowly towards the house and turned away humming a verse of

Malbrouck' s'en va-t-en guerre.

"Yes, I've no doubt he did," he said to himself, "but he never went to war with a staff consisting of two non-existent cousins, a disguised peer, an undisguised curate, a concealed cousin, a sham Professor, and a partially converted uncle. However, 'England expects . . .,' and that reminds me, what *does* England expect? I'd better go and have a look for him: he's more likely to have an idea than any one else," and he too vanished into the house.

He encountered the Professor in the hall.

"Come up to my room, Smiler," he whispered as he went by, "it's the safest place for a talk."

England followed him after a discreet interval: he locked the door behind him and relapsed, if not into cheerfulness, at least into a more normal shade of gloom. The baronet's opening words were not encouraging.

"We're for it, old man," he said, "serve out the tot of rum, keep your eye on zero, and all that! The fat's fairly in the fire now. I

didn't tell you, but I've asked Geoffrey and Walter to come down to-night: I didn't tell old Uncle Bob: I thought it would be a nice surprise for him: present for a good old boy and that sort of thing—and now it appears that the poor old chap has gone and sworn black and blue to Mrs. Branson that he's got no children and never had any. I can't think what made him raise the subject at all; downright indelicate, I call it! Anyhow they're both coming to-night—Drayworth arr. 6.52, as old Bradshaw puts it in his nervous style. What do you make of that for a problem? I wish some of those Johnnies who crack up the country as a sort of rest-cure would try it for a bit: I've never been so hunted as I have to-day."

England was filling his pipe as he listened.

"You can't have 'em up here," he said, "that's perfectly clear: I saw your uncle come through the hall just now and he's a stricken man, Dick; another shock would knock him clean off his perch. Has he had anything else to worry him?"

"Yes, he's got some yarn about George Howard running off with a drunken nurse that the Archdeacon's been telling him: I haven't had time to go into it, but he was fear-

fully upset, and I had to say I'd look into it and try and clear matters up. It'll be a lesson to old George not to let his children catch measles! If Alice had been able to come half the battle would have been saved—but then we shouldn't have had Mary here, and I must say she's done gallantly."

"I think Mrs. Branson was at your uncle about the divorce too," said the captain: "I heard them at it in the garden after luncheon and thought he was a bit hard pressed, so I made a bit of a diversion."

"I heard about that," said Sir Richard; "Uncle Bob was jolly grateful. and so'd Mary be if she knew."

"Now drop that, old man," said his friend. "I've told you she's got *not* to know and that's the end of it. How's Ranby getting on?"

"By George, I'd almost forgotten," said Sir Richard, "that's another pretty little complication. He's had a wire from Paul to say he's coming by the 6.52 too: I can't think why, nor can he. Jolly slack life these parsons seem to have," he went on; "fancy getting off on a Tuesday just as if it was a holiday. However, he's coming by the same train as the Waltons," he went on, with constitutional readiness to look on the bright side of things,

"so the same car can meet them all. One's jolly well got to be thankful for small mercies in a situation like this."

"But what are you going to do with them all when they do come?" asked Captain England: "you can't have any of them here without a complete give-away."

"Well, that's what I wanted to ask you," said the baronet; "the first thing to do is to stow them out of the way somewhere: we can't take them on as footmen, I suppose? It'd be overdoing it a bit to run in three extra footmen; besides, Paul would be bound to be spotted, and Geoffrey's jolly like his father if it comes to that. Besides, I don't suppose they'd have liked it either and the servants would think it a bit funny. No, that's not a good idea, I grant you. You try your hand old man!"

England pondered deeply. "I suppose you could put them up in the stables," he said at last. "Brady's a sensible chap and can hold his tongue, and if he goes and meets them he could stow them in there without any one knowing. You'll have to tell him some yarn or other about a surprise for their relations to-morrow, or something like that. He'll think it's just a practical joke. But I

don't see how you can keep it up beyond to-night. Besides, I've more or less let myself in for giving a kind of spiritualistic *seance* to-night: it was the only way I could think of for rescuing your uncle, so everything seems to point to our winding up the company as soon as we can. Assets nil—liabilities pretty considerable, that's what it looks like to me."

"Oh come, take a cheerful view!" said Sir Richard; "there's all sorts of things may happen before to-morrow. Not but what it's a damned close-run thing, as the Duke said of the Battle of Waterloo—and talking about battles reminds me that I've told Uncle Bob and Ranby that we'd have a council of war in the smoking-room as soon as they'd changed. You must come to it, Smiler; and I'll tell you what," he went on, "it'd make things easier by a long chalk if you'd let me tell them who you are. It's like a sum in four dimensions as it is, and it takes such a deuce of a time to get anything done when you have to talk like a half-baked Caucasian—no offence, old chap, you do it A1, but you know what I mean."

"All right," said England, "I daresay it would be best: I don't mind your giving

me away to Walton and Ranby, but just remember, not a word to Lady Mary!"

Sir Richard would have preferred to have all the mystery cleared away at once, but he was too wise to press his advantage further.

"Right you are," he said; "it's a bit rough on her, but after all, I owe her one for getting my brother-in-law into the Divorce Court!"

The two confederates descended the stairs together.

CHAPTER XI

A COUNCIL OF WAR

The combat thickens. On, ye brave!
CAMPBELL.

WHEN they entered the smoking-room they found Mr. Walton and Lord Ranby sitting side by side on the sofa, engaged in intimate but rather gloomy conversation. On seeing Lapski, they hurriedly retreated to opposite ends of the sofa.

"Aha! Messieurs les conspirateurs! je vous y prend!" cried Sir Richard gaily. "No offence, Uncle Bob, I only wanted to show off my knowledge of Napoleonic history: my special subject at Oxford, you know!"

The other two looked at him blankly: had their host and ally taken leave of his senses? If not, why expose them to a stranger? And why, in the name of all that was reasonable, why introduce Lapski—Lapski the spy, the man of mystery, whose penetrating eye they had more reason than ever to fear—why

introduce him to the scene of their most secret discussion?

Sir Richard hastened to undeceive them.

"Uncle Bob," he said, "I owe you both an apology. I know you've had some baddish moments from our friend here, but I want to explain it was my fault and not his. Lapski isn't half as black as he's painted. In fact, if he were to take off that wig, you'd see his close-cropped sunny curls mantling over his massy brow like a young Adonis. He had a reddish moustache too, but he's sacrificed that to the call of duty. 'Duty before decency,' as the chap said in *Midshipman Easy*, that's Smiler's motto—but it *was* a rotten bad moustache, wasn't it?" he added in a parenthesis. "The fact is, my lords and gentlemen, I will no longer delay to present to you my trusty comrade and old-time playmate, Captain England, D.S.O., my well-tried friend, secretary, and political agent!"

As he spoke he seized Lapski's hair and with a well-directed jerk removed the wig: England took off his spectacles and stood before them his normal self, though the black frock-coat of the Professor sat quaintly on his soldierly figure.

"I'm afraid I owe you an apology too, Mr.

Walton," he said; "it's quite true, the whole thing was Dick's idea, and I had to live up to my part, but I'm afraid I was just a little indiscreet about beer! All I can say for myself is that I did my best to help you with those dromedaries last night; and this afternoon, too, when you seemed to be having a roughish time with Mrs. Branson in the garden——"

The brewer had followed the revelation with staring eyes. Dick's impudence had at first annoyed him, and his feelings towards Lapski had not ever, as we know, been cordial, but as the immensity of the deception dawned on him he saw its humorous side. England's apology completed the conquest: he owned that he had twice had real reason to be grateful, and after all, if he had been deceived, he had not suffered as severely as others. He magnanimously extended his hand.

"Well, sir," he said, "I must congratulate you on a very clever performance: my young nephew seems to have the habit of getting people into awkward situations. I only hope that you and he will be able to show as much skill in getting us out. For there's no denying we're in a mess now, and I for one don't

see any prospect of escape—nor, I think I'm right in saying, does Lord Ranby—we were talking it over when you came in, and we were both of us absolutely beaten by it."

"Oh come, Mr. Walton," said Lord Ranby, "I don't think things are quite as bad as that! After all, when we were talking about it just now, we didn't know who Professor Lapski was,—and he's an uncommon good card."

"I'm not disparaging Captain England's merits as an actor," said Mr. Walton, "I've good reason to appreciate them: I don't deny he's a good card: what I say is that he's the only one we've got."

"Well, the moral of that is that we must play him for all he's worth," said Sir Richard; "but I don't agree with your view that we have no others. Let's see whom we've got that we can depend on. There are four of us to start with," he began, "and three more coming to-night—Paul, Geoffrey, and Walter."

"Oh come," objected Mr. Walton, "aren't you rather mixing up your assets with your liabilities? And that's a short cut to the criminal dock. I don't deny that Mr. Ranby may conceivably be of some use to his

brother, but what earthly help my two sons can be to me I confess I don't see. I never understood before what was meant by advertising for a man 'without encumbrances,' but I think I know now."

"Oh well, Uncle Bob, I was only just looking at all the cards in our hand: I didn't say they were all good ones."

"I think you'd do better with a singleton in that particular suit," retorted his uncle grimly.

"Well then, what about the ladies?" went on his nephew.

"Miss Montford would be all right, I'm sure," said Lord Ranby, blushing slightly; "what do you say to my having it all out with her? I know she'd play up for all she's worth."

"I'm sure she would, old man," said Sir Richard, "but it might be bad luck if she had to take a hand against the Archdeacon, and I'm afraid he must be counted as the enemy."

No one ventured to question this proposition, and it cannot be denied that the light of battle rose to the eyes of Mr. Walton and Lord Ranby. "I don't think we ought to count her as yet."

"Well, of course, there's Alice," said her uncle.

"Ye-e-s, Alice, of course," assented Sir Richard, "but it might be a bit awkward for her too—especially as she's the hostess: we'd better leave her out too for the present."

There was a pause: no one liked to introduce the delicate topic of the Branson family. England decided to bell the cat.

"I think we've got to face the fact, Dick, that Mrs. Branson is the real difficulty: what we've got to do is to keep her in the dark. We *might* manage it for to-night, with luck, though it will take some doing, but I own I can't see how we can any of us keep it up longer. The real question is, is that long enough?"

Sir Richard was a man of courage and decision.

"What's the time?" said he; "5.30? Well, we'll put dinner at 8.30, that'll give us three clear hours. I can easily say that the Professor's tired and wants as long a rest as possible before to-night's *seance*. I'll tell Mrs. B. he's going to do his best to get into touch with the late-lamented Branson and doesn't want to waste his physical powers too soon. In fact, Smiler, old man," he

went on, "I shouldn't wonder if it would be a good plan if you were to have dinner upstairs: we're eight without you, so that'll be all right. And it'll give you more time for arranging your spooks and things. I haven't the least idea what you're going to do or how you're going to do it, but I leave it in your hands with perfect confidence. We'll have a short dinner, and be ready for the lonely heath and the witches and the limelight by about 9.30. Now I'll go and see Brady and tell him to meet the train and bestow our young friends in the stables, and then take an hour or two for what we used to call Urgent Private Affairs in the Army, when one was trying to screw out some extra leave. You just put your heads together and make up the best plan you can, and Peter shall come and see me when I'm dressing and tell me my cues. But you'll remember what a duffer I am and don't put me down for too big a part: 'confused noise without' and that sort of thing I can do with the best, but when it comes to being one's own long-lost brother, well, I leave that to you, Peter, or Uncle Bob perhaps, after all the practice he's had."

So saying, the cheerful young baronet left

the room. The others, though a little inclined to resent his desertion, could not deny that he had made out a plausible case, and, after all, Dick was a man of action rather than of counsel.

The problem was not a simple one. The main difficulty was to establish Lapski's reputation on so secure a footing that any suggestions he might make were likely to be received as authoritative. A secondary difficulty was to remove Mrs. Branson from the scene of action before the time came for the inevitable revelations. The Archdeacon was a problem by himself, but, as Ranby generously recognised, one of a less pressing nature. Still, even with that admission, enough remained to give the three conspirators ample food for thought.

It was agreed on all hands, as has been said, that to establish confidence in the mind of Mrs. Branson was the essential preliminary. Any lingering doubts remaining there might prove fatal to Dick's prospects.

"I think I could tackle her all right by herself," said England, "but the Archdeacon's a harder problem, and if he's suspicious he may spoil the whole game: he's got a nasty suspicious nature too. I re-

member his making me take off my great-coat in early school because he wanted to be sure I was properly dressed."

"And what had you got on?" asked Peter with undisguised interest.

"Not much," said the Captain grimly; "but that's not the point; the question is, how we're to convince him now."

"Well, he won't be much impressed by anything *I* say," said Peter. "I never knew these old Church dignitaries were so down on curates! I understand what they mean by calling them 'the inferior clergy.' Why, he looks down his nose at me the whole blessed time! And he wouldn't believe me if I said I saw old Branson as large as life."

"No, you aren't much use there, I'm afraid," said England; "Dick's a little better, but not much. Mr. Walton's the only person who can really help us. You see, no one's got any suspicion of him, and what he says goes."

"I'm not so sure of that," said Mr. Walton; "I'm afraid my reputation's a little blown upon with the Archdeacon."

"Oh, not seriously," said Peter; "and if we can give him a little more circumstantial evidence he'll never dream of doubting you."

The brewer looked at him a little doubtfully: he distrusted Lord Ranby as a manufacturer of circumstantial evidence, and foresaw trouble ahead: he could not deny that his theoretical respectability was an asset to the conspiracy, but he disliked the idea of being made the pivot on which the plot was to turn, nor did he see how the result could be achieved.

But it was not for nothing that England had pitted his brains for two years of captivity against those of his Turkish gaolers: it was not long before he had laid before them the rudiments of a plan, and an hour's animated discussion clothed the dry bones with life. By half-past six a scheme had been evolved to which Mr. Walton, though with many searchings of the heart and some shaking of the head, was prepared to give in his adhesion.

"It's a very risky business," said he, "and I'm afraid you're expecting too much of me. I'm no actor, and until I came here yesterday I never expected to find myself attempting it, but I have confidence in Captain England, and the plan's just worth trying. There's one thing to be thankful for, and that is that

my wife isn't here: if she knew——" and the poor man was lost in thoughts of gloom.

Lord Ranby was deep in a book he had just picked up. "I'll tell you what, Mr. Walton," he said, "it mightn't be a bad plan if we mugged up a little about that place of yours—Masulipatam, I mean. Then we could do a star turn together and turn the tables on the Archdeacon. Look here, this is what *Chambers's Encyclopædia* says about the place—

"*Masulipatam.*—A maritime district of British India in the presidency of Madras, having the river Kistnah for its S.W. boundary. Area 5000 square miles, population 520,866. The commercial crops are chay-root, indigo, tobacco, and cotton.

"Why, that's enough, properly used, to last us for a couple of nights! I wonder what the chay-root is, though? Anyhow, old Montford's safe not to know."

Mr. Walton did not receive the suggestion with favour: he had hoped that he had heard the last of his Indian career; he feared Ranby slightly as an ally, and it was with reluctant hands that he accepted the gift of the *Encyclopædia*. He doubted his ability

to improvise on the subject of the chay-root, and felt doubtful of the accuracy of his memory for figures.

At this point it was proposed by Peter, and carried by a majority of one, that he should be given *carte blanche* to reveal his identity to Miss Montford.

"It can't do any harm" he urged, "and it may do good: I won't let her in for doing anything against her father—and dash it all, I think I deserve a little consideration!"

Mr. Walton demurred to the scheme as dangerous, but contented himself with recording his dissent.

Peter lost no time in seeking out Miss Montford: it may be that the sight of Sir Richard and Miss Branson, whom he had discerned through the window, strolling on the tennis court, had aroused his jealousy and kindled his imagination. Be that as it may, it was not long before Miss Montford also had consented to face the evening air, and was being piloted by Peter to the opposite side of the garden.

It may not unjustly be complained by the feminine reader that no attempt has been made to do justice to the personal charms of either of these young ladies: we have been

asked, she may urge, to take their merits entirely on trust. It is clear that they were attractive in the eyes of two susceptible young gentlemen, but have we not the right to form an opinion of our own? Have we not the right to know what Diana wore? To learn the colour of the eyes into which Sir Richard was at the moment gazing? And Miss Montford's qualities—are they to be guessed by an intensive study of those of the Archdeacon?

To these questions only one answer can be given, and it is not so feeble a one as might be feared. It is, or should be, enough for us to know that neither Sir Richard nor Lord Ranby saw anything to criticise in the character, intelligence, personal appearance, or dress of either of the young ladies concerned. They may have been mistaken, for love is blind. But if so, who would wish to mock at their illusions? It is safer to assume that they were right, and to look for the proof in the future rather than in the present.

This narrative is not a love story, save in so far as love (which moves the heaven and all the stars) had provided the ultimate motive power leading to the difficulties of the moment, and as we have passed lightly over

the attractions of its heroines, so shall we skim with equally rapid passage over the love-making of its heroes. It is enough to say that neither of them failed to make good use of his opportunity, and that when the company assembled for dinner—with the exception of Professor Lapski, who was understood to be resting—there were four pairs of eyes which shone with more than their customary light. Mrs. Branson's eyes reflected her ardent anticipation of the evening's revelations. Mr. Walton's eyes did not shine, but he was conscious of a not unpleasurable thrill of excitement. The Archdeacon's eyes did not shine either: had the fact been pointed out to him, he would no doubt have classed such a phenomenon with the light of those illegal candles which he and Mr. Walton had so unsparingly condemned that afternoon.

CHAPTER XII

FANCIES AND FACTS

How many lies did it require to make
The portly fact you here present us with?
BROWNING.

DINNER was an uneventful meal. Most of the company were too deeply interested in the prospect before them to be in a conversational mood, and Sir Richard exerted himself to bring all the party into any discussion that arose, on the sound principle that there was safety in numbers. It seemed to him on the whole that ecclesiastical topics were the least dangerous: it was known that they provided a common meeting ground between Mr. Walton and the Archdeacon.

"I don't know whether you've ever met our Vicar, Archdeacon," he began. "He's a capital chap, visits all the old people and does his best to keep the young ones out of mischief, but he can't preach for nuts. He takes no end of trouble, I know, but the

result's simply deplorable. He knows he can't do it too, which makes it worse. He told me rather a funny story the other day, about a Ruridecanal conference he went to. He made a speech proposing that the clergy should only have to produce one sermon a Sunday, and then any one who'd heard it in the morning could go out before it came on in the evening: have a hymn or something, and the collection of course, and then good-bye! Well, all the laymen who were there caught on to it like anything, said it was the best idea they'd ever heard, and so on, and he thought he was going to carry it—but then all the clergy got up one after another and said that they quite appreciated the self-sacrifice of the laity and all that, and how they knew they were only saying what they did out of pity for the hard-worked parson, and that they'd really be bitterly disappointed if they didn't get their two sermons regularly. Hungry sheep looking up and not being fed, and all that. The laity begged them to believe they were quite sincere, but the clergy wouldn't have it, and so, as there were more clergymen there than laymen, the motion was lost, and poor old Richardson came back

sadly to grind out his two discourses for Sunday."

The Archdeacon received this anecdote with portentous gloom. "I have often thought," he said, "that the growing neglect of the sermon is one of the most serious signs of the times: the young High Churchmen of the present day are neglecting what has been in the past the most powerful weapon in their possession: I am sure Mr. Walton agrees with me?"

"Well, I'm bound to say," responded the brewer, "I hadn't noticed much falling off in quantity, but I agree that the quality's going down: it's what would be called in the Trade a lowering of gravity all round."

Realising that he was on dangerous ground, he went on hastily: "And the sermons I've heard lately have often been just party pamphlets, advocating some new little trick or other as if that was the one thing Religion meant. I can't think they can have spent much time in making them up. I know I'm old-fashioned, but I like a sermon that gives one something to think about, and what I get is a sniffy little lecture from a gentleman just down from Oxford who talks as if he

were a young Apostle instead of being a young ass, as he very often is."

"I fear," said the Archdeacon, "that it is sadly true that the younger generation of clergy are very remiss in keeping up their intellectual life: it is deplorable, most deplorable. I know many a young curate, who has only been three or four years in Orders, who never dreams of writing out his sermon: he trusts to what he is pleased to call the inspiration of the moment. Five minutes' prattle on the latest thing they have been reading in the papers is their conception of their duty as ministers of the Word! I trust, Mr. Ranby, if you will forgive an older man for asking the question, that you always write your sermons?"

"Confound his impudence!" thought Peter. "I'm afraid I can't say I do," he answered aloud: "the congregations I get in my mission district don't seem quite to want a learned discourse such as Mr. Walton was speaking of: in fact," he went on, "I really can't remember that I've written a sermon for the last two years—no, certainly not for at least two years," he added with every appearance of sincerity.

The Archdeacon glanced at Mr. Walton

with a slight shrug of his shoulders, as much as to say, "What did I tell you?" but it was Mrs. Branson who carried on the conversation.

"Well, I call that just too clever of you," she said. "Now in America we think a great deal of the sermon: I remember a young preacher we had once in Chicago, and he often used to preach for an hour, and sometimes for an hour and a half, and they told me that he had two lady typists hard at work every week from Wednesday morning right on to Saturday night putting it all down just as fast as he could think of it. My poor husband used to think the world of that man. 'Pauline,' he often said to me, 'Pauline, that young fellow is just too eloquent to live.' But to think of Mr. Ranby doing it all out of his head! I'd just have loved to bring Chetwode to sit under you, Mr. Ranby!"

"I'm afraid you've got too high an opinion of my eloquence, Mrs. Branson," said Ranby, laughing: "I don't think you'd find my parishioners shared your view. I'm not sure one's best work isn't done out of church: you remember what the poet says:

"Common folk who read and write and like their betters speak
Want something more than pipes and beer and sermons twice a week,

and that 'something more' is what we've got to try and give them."

"I agree with you, Paul," said Sir Richard heartily; "give them a whist drive now and again, and a Social Evening, and a dance—that'll keep them out of the pubs! We've got to do something of the kind down here or you'll be making the town so jolly attractive that we shan't have any one left on the land!"

Archdeacon Montford would have liked to pulverize Mr. Ranby: but he saw that the sense of the meeting was against him, and he did not wish to come into conflict with his host. "I must really speak to Dawkins," he thought, "he may be able to give a hint to the poor young man's Vicar." He decided to change the subject, and turned to Lady Mary.

"I'm 'fraid, Mrs. Howard," he said "that I heard this evening that I simply must be in Manchester to-morrow for a meeting of my dilapidations committee: I do hope it won't be very inconvenient if I ask to be sent in to an early train? I hope to be back in time for dinner, and I shall feel that I am leaving Mary in good hands."

The unexpected news was almost too good

to be true: the three other gentlemen glanced at each other with exultation.

"Oh, that will be quite easy," said Lady Mary; "I'm only so sorry that you should miss a day's sport. Let me see, where are you going to-morrow, Dick? Is it to the Low Farm? But I'm afraid you'll miss the Archdeacon sadly. Oughtn't you to get another gun from somewhere?"

The sudden and delightful surprise had thrown Dick off his guard.

"Oh, that'll be all right," said he: "I've got two other fellows coming." He hesitated a moment, realising his *faux pas*, and went on with a slight blush—"at least I haven't *got* them exactly, but there were two young fellows I'd told I might be able to give a day to, and now I must let them know. It'll take two good ordinary shots to fill the Archdeacon's place," he added, smiling at his guest.

The demon of mischief was working in Ranby's soul: the Archdeacon's attack rankled, and he saw his chance of revenge.

"I suppose," he said across the table, "I suppose you've come across a good many of the big cotton people in Manchester? They

seem to be making a rare fuss over this Indian cotton business."

The Archdeacon was too good a local patriot not to respond. "It is a very serious situation," he answered, "and there is no doubt that Lancashire will be very hard hit if nothing can be done. The Indian demands are very serious—very serious indeed."

"I expect Mr. Walton could tell us something of the Indian point of view," went on Ranby, with the light of mischief in his eye: "I think there is a good deal of cotton manufactured in your part?"

"Yes, yes, there *are* cotton factories certainly," said Mr. Walton sulkily; his distrust of Ranby was reviving, and he had no desire to embark on an exposition of Indian commercial policy.

"I quite understand," said the Archdeacon, "that, where an entire population subsists on the manufacture of cotton, the Lancashire rivalry must seem a very grievous hardship, but nevertheless——"

"Oh, but that could hardly be said of Masulipatam, could it?" said Lord Ranby: "they make other things besides cotton; don't they, Mr. Walton?"

The brewer glared at his tormentor.

"Yes," he said slowly, "there *are* other industries, certainly: there is tobacco and indigo—and chay-root."

"Indeed," said the Archdeacon, "that is very interesting. Now what proportion of the population should you say was primarily interested in cotton?"

Rage seethed in the brewer's breast, but there was no help for it: he glanced across the table at Peter, whose ingenuous countenance expressed nothing but the liveliest interest.

"Let me see," he began, with the air of one repeating a lesson, "let me see—the area of the district of Masulipatam is approximately 5000 square miles: the district is bounded on the S. W. by the river Kistnah, you know. The population at the last census was, in round figures, about 520,866, but when you come to the question of the exact proportion engaged in the cotton industry"—he had been going more and more slowly as he proceeded. His mind was engaged in the effort to divide 520,000 among four leading trades: he was hampered at every turn by his ignorance of the probable demands of the chay-root industry: again, ought he to count in women and children?

the number of square miles in his detested district kept on asserting itself with needless emphasis. He paused as though in deep thought. What answer he would have evolved from his materials will never be known, for at this moment Mrs. Branson, who was undisguisedly bored with statistics, interposed with another question.

"Say, Mr. Walton," she said, "what kind of a plant is that chay-root you mentioned right now? I can't remember ever to have come across it before."

Any diversion might have been supposed to be welcome, but the proffered frying-pan was little more attractive than the fire which was at the moment consuming him. Ranby came to his rescue—none too soon.

"I think I can answer that question, Mrs. Branson," he said; "my brother-in-law, George Fitzherbert, of whom I think I was speaking last night, is very much interested in philology, and he tells me that our word cheroot is derived from that origin. It appears that these roots, when chopped up very small, give a peculiar flavour to the cigar, and the Masulipatam cigar, as Mr. Walton will tell you, is renowned all over India. Very curious these derivations of

words, aren't they? I confess I'd no idea of it till George wrote."

"Well, isn't that just too curious?" said Mrs. Branson, with undisguised interest.

The Archdeacon looked suspiciously at Mr. Ranby, but was baffled as before by his cherubic air of innocence. He turned again to Mr. Walton.

"I beg your pardon," he said, "I am afraid this digression, this very interesting digression, has prevented us from hearing what you were going to tell us about the cotton industry. I should much like to get some really exact figures from one who can speak with authority. One hears so much loose talking nowadays that it is more than usually valuable to have the opportunity of consulting a real expert."

But Mr. Walton had employed the interval in conveying to Sir Richard an agonized appeal, and the baronet came to the help of his sorely tried uncle.

"If you don't mind, Archdeacon," he said, "I think we must ask you to postpone your talk with Mr. Walton: it's getting rather late, and we oughtn't to keep the Professor waiting: I think, Alice, if you don't mind, we'll come along with you so as

to be able to get to work at once. The spirits won't mind tobacco, I expect, and if the ladies are equally kind, we can smoke in the drawing-room."

The company adjourned. Ranby lingered for a word with Mr. Walton.

"I think we gave him as good as we got," he whispered; "but what a head you've got for figures! I can't tell you how I admired you."

Mr. Walton would have liked to point out to his ally that he had been wantonly exposed in the forefront of the battle: but after all he had escaped, and the chay-root episode had stirred him to gratitude.

"I should like to listen to one of your sermons, Mr. Ranby," he said grimly; "the virtue of Truth would be a good subject. I suppose you made up all that about the chay-root?"

"Of course I did," said that unabashed young nobleman; "I haven't the least idea what it is: we must have another look at old *Chambers* to-morrow."

And they followed the others into the drawing-room.

CHAPTER XIII

IMAGINARY CONVERSATIONS

And after all what is a lie? 'Tis but
The truth in masquerade.

BYRON.

PROFESSOR LAPSKI was installed in an arm-chair: he rose as the ladies entered and greeted them with a wan smile.

"I am here," he said; "I will do my possible—but the power, he is not of me. The spirits must work. I, I am but the pen, the eye, the ear! We will begin, if you please, with that which is least, and then, if it can be, we come at last to that which is high."

It had been decided that the turning of tables should form the first exhibition of the controlling power of the spirits from another world. The phenomenon is so familiar that it calls for no special description. It is enough to say that four pairs of strong and willing hands can achieve surprising results, and that the table at Drayworth Manor dis-

played an agility which did credit to their efforts. The Professor did not affect to attach much importance to the performance.

"It is but a little thing," he said; "I value it not, but it tells me the spirits are willing. It is a good night: I have hopes, yes, but I promise not. We can but try, and you will lend the willing mind, is it not so? The spirits come not often to those who trust them not."

The Archdeacon snorted audibly: he was frankly incredulous of Lapski's special powers: the table-turning annoyed him, as being a thing for which he could not account, but it was very far from convincing him that he had to deal with anything more than a common trickster. The rest of the company, for various reasons, were only too ready to comply with Lapski's request.

"We come now," he said, "to another trial. Let us sit at this table—ah, he is still now! we put the candles upon him, so. I am not of those who work in the dark. And now I will try to bring before your eyes some one who is not here. You shall name him to me and I will call. Who shall it be? Think well, that he may be some one whom you shall all know, that so the doubters may

believe——" and he glanced at the Archdeacon.

There was a pause: it was not easy to think of any one whom all the company could be trusted to recognise.

"I've got it," said Peter at last; "let's ask the Professor to call up my brother. We're as like one another as two peas, so you'll all have a chance of judging."

The suggestion found general favour.

"Yes, Professor," said Sir Richard, "let us have Lord Ranby."

"So be it," said Lapski; "I can but try; and now I beg of you all to be silent while I shall make my call."

There was silence in the room: the candle-light shone on the countenance of the Professor as with half-shut eyes he wrestled in thought with his unseen auxiliaries. The rest of the room was in darkness, and even Mr. Walton could not repress a slight thrill of emotion as he looked round upon the scene. The ladies were frankly on the tiptoe of expectation, though he saw Miss Montford cast a hurried look at Ranby, and felt under the table a rapid pressure of the foot which appeared to be a misdirected answer.

One minute passed—two minutes—and

then, very softly, was heard a gentle sound as of a nail scratching on a window pane. The Professor raised his hand.

"Hark," he said, "it has been hard—I know not why, the spirits they mock at me—they say I ask a foolish thing, but I entreat—I entreat, and they yield at last. Behold!"

And he sprang to the window, and drew the curtain aside. The night was dark, but there, in the frame of darkness, looking in at the window was a face—it gleamed with an unearthly light, or so it seemed to the onlookers, for an electric torch in the dark can give a very eerie look. And the features were unmistakable. They were the very replica of those of the man who sat at the table staring into the dark.

"There's a glass—it must be a glass,"—muttered the Archdeacon.

"Oh, steady on, Archdeacon," said Sir Richard; "why, Paul's sitting and he's standing—and just look at his hands!"

But Lapski paid no attention to the hostile comment.

"Ah," he cried with passion, "it is a lie! I have been mocked. It is not his brother, it is himself!"

It was indeed so; in the moment of the

first surprise they had not realised it, but the man whose face thus looked upon them wore indeed a clerical dress, less orthodox perhaps than that of Peter, but undeniable.

Lapski dropped the curtain and turned upon Ranby in a towering rage. "It is you that mock me," he cried; "speak, who are you?" He threatened him with a menacing forefinger, and his eyes glared savagely through his spectacles. "Is this your trust and honour with the spirits? Speak now! It is enough, let us have done with lies!"

All eyes were turned on Peter. He had blushed scarlet, and it was in a low tone that he spoke, very different from the jaunty accents which had provoked the Archdeacon earlier in the evening.

"I'm awfully sorry, Professor," he said, "it was a rotten thing to do and I do hope your spirit friends won't take it out of you for it. It's all my fault! I can't tell you how sorry I am, Mrs. Howard," he went on, turning to her, "but the fact is I'm Peter Ranby and not Paul at all. I got involved in pretending to be him in the train, as Mr. Walton can tell you, and then I had to stick to it, or he'd have found me out. Of course I never meant to give all this trouble, and I

can only say I'm ashamed of myself, and I do hope you and Dick will forgive me."

Mr. Walton came magnanimously to his assistance.

"I think I can explain how it happened," he said, "and you will see that it was a generous mistake on Lord Ranby's part. He heard his brother being attacked by a shocking old cad in the train, and he pretended he was Paul Ranby just to be able to defend him better. I suppose I've got the first grievance," he went on, smiling, "as I was the first to be taken in, but I can only say that I forgive you freely and I hope that Alice and Dick will be equally merciful."

"Don't say another word about it, Peter," cried Sir Richard; "I think it was a jolly sporting thing to do, and I quite see you couldn't stop it when you'd once got started. Jolly hard when the ball's once rolling, isn't it, Uncle Bob? the first step on the downward path and all that!"

Mr. Walton smiled again. Lady Mary echoed her cousin's forgiveness. Peter turned to the Archdeacon.

"I do hope you'll forgive me too, sir," he said. "I felt an awful worm when you were giving me all that good advice. I'll hand it

on to Paul, I promise you—but you *do* see now why I couldn't tell you much about Canon Dawkins?"

The Archdeacon took a moment to consider his verdict. He had the constitutional dislike of a dignitary to being deceived, and there was no doubt that he had wasted a good deal of valuable seed on a singularly unproductive soil. On the other hand, he could not disguise from himself that a possible detrimental had been removed, and that the flirtation which had caused him so much annoyance might be viewed with a more lenient eye. It may be that an appealing look on his daughter's face assisted the cause of mercy. His countenance relaxed.

"Well, well," he said, "young men will be young men, and I have no doubt that Lord Ranby's motives were of the highest. I confess that I had some suspicion of him from the first: old eyes, you know, are sometimes sharper than you young ones think, ha ha!"

"Yes, sir, I was very nervous when I felt I had your eye on me," said the sycophantic Peter; and the matter was satisfactorily settled on the basis of a general agreement that the Archdeacon had practically made the discovery unaided.

Lapski had sunk into a chair and paid no attention to these amenities. When the company had recovered from the shock of Lord Ranby's confession they looked on him with some dismay. He was muttering to himself. "Forgive me! ah yes, forgive! it was in ignorance that I speak! Not for the world would I deceive you. The lie, he was not of me!"

He roused himself and addressed the others.

"For me, I forgive! for the spirits, I know not: it can be that they are angry with me for that I have deceived them unknowing. Let us proceed."

"I'm sure we all agree that was a very wonderful vision, Professor," said Mr. Walton; "I confess I could not have believed it if I had not seen it with my own eyes, but no doubt there's some explanation of it. I suppose what we saw was the astral body of Paul, whatever that exactly means, and you spirited it here from the Potteries."

"An appearance must be a material thing," said the Archdeacon didactically; "the impression on the retina can only be produced by physical causes: Paul Ranby exists in space, and space (as I heard Pro-

fessor Einstein explain the other day) is after all not an extension but a manifold. What exists in one part is no doubt transferable to any other part."

Professor Lapski had listened to this discussion with keen attention.

"Ah," he said, "you are not yet convinced? You think I juggle with the things of this world! I tell you No! it is the world of spirits with which I deal. Look, I give you the proof! If I show you that which never has existed, you believe then, Yes? And I will do it, if the spirits forbid not! Listen, sir," he went on rapidly, addressing Mr. Walton, "you are a man of no children, is it not so? What if I show you the very forms of the children you might have had, will you then believe? Nay, you *shall* believe! Sit down and I shall show!"

He almost forced the reluctant brewer into his seat, and the company, overpowered by his energy, resumed their places in silence. Mr. Walton was visibly moved.

"Ah, if you could do that—" he muttered, "if you could do that!" He shook his head with an air of incredulity.

Lapski sat down: as the moment of crisis drew near, he calmed himself by a manifest

effort, but the nervous working of his fingers betrayed the greatness of the strain. Lady Mary gazed at him with wonder: Mrs. Branson was by this time in the last stage of nervous excitement, and the hands of the two young ladies stole insensibly under the table into the reassuring grasp of their respective admirers.

Mr. Walton sat with his face buried in his hands, the better, no doubt, to conceal his emotions; even the scepticism of the Archdeacon was awed into silence.

As before, there was a prolonged period of silence: this time there was no audible sign of the crisis, but at last Lapski arose; his eyes were staring as those of one walking in his sleep: his fingers still worked convulsively. "They come, they come," he muttered; "ah, grant us but the power to see!" He advanced slowly to the curtain—peered through its folds as though they had no power to check his vision, and then, with his features relaxing into something like a smile, he turned and beckoned to Mr. Walton.

"Approach," he said in a whisper which thrilled through the ears of his audience, "approach, O doubtful man, and see what might have been!"

Mr. Walton rose from his seat, and with unsteady steps approached the window. Lapski with a grand gesture flung the curtain back. "Behold!" he cried.

The rest of the company could dimly see from where they sat: the window opened on a lawn which was bordered by bushes. From the shadow there emerged two forms: their figures, their dress, could be but dimly seen, but their faces glowed with the same unearthly radiance—dimmer perhaps, for electric torches cannot last for ever, but unmistakably the same. Mr. Walton uttered a great cry and struck his forehead with his hand.

"Gracious God in heaven!" he almost screamed: "one of them has my wife's eyes! her hair! her very look! It is too much!" He put his hand to his throat as though to loosen his collar, and with a strangled exclamation fell fainting to the floor. The others had left their seats and crept up behind him to peer over his shoulder. Lapski dropped the curtain and sprang to his assistance, but it was Sir Richard whose strong arm broke his fall. Lord Ranby loosened his collar, while the Archdeacon ran hurriedly to the dining-room, and returned with a

soda-water syphon, which he squirted vigorously into the face of the unconscious brewer.

This treatment, which was an entirely unauthorised addition to the programme, rapidly took effect: Mr. Walton sat up with something very like a scowl on his face, but on catching the Professor's eye relapsed into a semiconscious condition. Lapski and his nephew supported him from the room. Ranby made as if he would follow, but the Archdeacon laid a shaking hand upon his arm.

"Did you see?" he asked in a voice quavering with emotion.

"See what?" asked Peter in some anxiety.

"The second of the two," whispered the Archdeacon. "I saw him just before the curtain fell, and Heaven forgive me! it might have been the face of poor Mr. Walton himself!"

Peter had himself been surprised at the likeness between Geoffrey and his father: "By Jove! that fellow England's a perfect artist," he said to himself; "I shouldn't have thought it could have been done." At any rate it was clear that there was nothing to be feared from the Archdeacon; he col-

lapsed into a chair, and Ranby felt at liberty to follow his confederates.

He found them in the smoking-room: Mr. Walton was a little ruffled at the drastic application of the soda water, and was disposed to blame his nephew for not having foreseen and averted it, but the warm congratulations of the other three on the masterly skill with which he had played his part soon restored his self-respect, and after a stiff tumbler of hot whisky and water he announced his intention of going to bed.

"I've done enough for one evening, I think," he said, "and I'll get up to my room where I can smoke in peace. A cigar, or what Lord Ranby would call a chay-root, is what I want to soothe my nerves. I wish you the best of luck with the rest of the evening! it ought to be pretty plain sailing now, I think."

The others returned to the drawing-room and announced that Mr. Walton did not feel equal to further exertions: the Professor showed deep compunction at the thought of the distress he had caused, and the Archdeacon pulled himself together sufficiently to point the moral that such dealings with the occult were dangerous, if not immoral. But

Mrs. Branson was urgent for a continuance of the *seance*. "Professor Lapski," she said solemnly, "I reckon that from first to last I've employed a matter of some five and twenty mediums to arouse my poor dear husband. Not one of them has done it. They all said that the case was one of very unusual complexity. But I've never run against one who gave me half the confidence that you do. I guess that if any one can awaken the spirit of Chetwode P. Branson it's you that are the man! So I do hope you'll just start right in and give him a call."

There was no resisting her appeal: the party resumed their places at the table, and the Professor produced the board of letters on which the moving pointer was to spell out the answer.

"I know not," he said gravely, "if he will wish to speak himself, or to speak by the board: it is right that we are ready."

His preliminary operations did not differ greatly from those of other practitioners. It was not long before a thin far-away voice broke the silence.

"Who are you?" it said.

"You just tell him it's me, Professor," said Mrs. Branson; "but that's never Chet-

wode's voice! he had a deep bass voice, though he never spoke very loud. He never was what I call a talking man."

"Ah, madam," said Lapski, "that was not his voice, no—it is the voice of my friend the spirit who show him the way."

He gave the necessary injunctions in a clear voice, and it was not long before a deeper tone was heard.

"Well, that's more like him," said Mrs. Branson, who was listening attentively: "it sounds a bit husky, but it's more like Chetwode; can you make out just what he says?"

"It is hard," said the Professor after listening intently; "he says one thing very often, but I cannot hear it right."

"And that's strange, too," replied Mrs. Branson, "for when Chetwode was at all excited he often would say just the same thing three times over—'Nonsense, nonsense, nonsense,' just like that."

"I think it is 'Not here' that he is saying," said Lapski after listening again; "but please try yourself to hear."

They all listened intently, and this time even the Archdeacon could distinguish the words 'Not here, not here, not here' uttered three times with considerable emphasis.

"He means perhaps that he cannot speak to you here," suggested the Archdeacon; "perhaps the Professor could ask him where he would wish to speak?"

The question was put, and after a time the answer came three times repeated as before, "America, America, America!"

"Well, isn't that just too strange?" said Mrs. Branson; "poor dear Chetwode would never come over to Europe, try all I could to bring him. He used to say he couldn't face the sea voyage, and it looks as if it was just the same still. Not but what," she added reflectively, "one would have thought he might have got round some other way from there. Well, you just tell him I'm going right home to Chicago and I'll try and ring him up from there."

At this point the voice said unmistakably, and indeed with a trace of asperity, "No, no, no."

Mrs. Branson was not surprised.

"Well, and that's very true, too! poor dear Chetwode never did seem rightly to like Chicago: he used to say Lake Michigan was too like the sea, and he never could fancy the Boulevards: he always seemed hankering after his home way down in Virginia. You

just ask him, Professor, whether it's there he'd like to speak to me."

Further researches revealed that Virginia was in fact the scene which Mr. Branson preferred for a conversation with his wife: he added the injunction that she must go there quite alone, and must spend a solitary vigil of a fortnight.

Lord Ranby gave an incautious chuckle, but passed it off as a cough. At this point the spirit evinced a desire to finish his communications by means of the board, which was accordingly brought into play. The message took some time to spell out, but there was eventually no doubt that Mr. Branson desired Mrs. Branson to return to London early on the next day, where she could find some good news awaiting her.

The pointer now began to wobble in an indeterminate manner: efforts to extract a meaning were in vain, and Professor Lapski who had been showing signs of fatigue (for ventriloquism is an undeniable strain), announced that no further revelations were likely for this evening. Mrs. Branson accepted the inevitable with a good grace.

"I can't tell you, Professor, how much I've enjoyed this little talk: it quite brings back

old times to have me talking to Chetwode and him hardly saying a word except to tell me he couldn't bear it any more. Well, I think I must go up to London to-morrow by that early train, if you'll be so very kind as to send me into it, Mrs. Howard. I'll leave Diana in your hands and I know you'll give her a real good time."

"Oh, that'll be quite simple," said Lady Mary; "in fact I think the Archdeacon's going by that train already."

"I shall be proud to act as your escort as far as Shrewsbury, Mrs. Branson," said that gentleman. "This has been a most interesting evening, and I am sure we are much indebted to Professor Lapski, very deeply indebted. You have given us much to think over, sir, and I hope to bring the matter of the intercourse with the spirit world before my clergy in my next archidiaconal charge. They are strangely behind the times in such things."

The Professor bowed his acknowledgments.

"And now, Mrs. Howard, in view of my early start I think, if you will forgive me, I ought to be going to bed—and Mary too—my dear child, I'm afraid this evening has been almost too much for you! You look

quite over-excited. It is high time you were in bed. Good-night—good-night!"

The company separated: the three remaining gentlemen watched the ladies ascend to their rooms, and then retired to the smoking-room. As the door closed behind them Sir Richard smote England heavily on the shoulder.

"Tommy," he said, "you're It! You're absolutely It! I'm more grateful than I can say! I hereby solemnly invite you to be my best man. I won't deny that Peter was first choice, but he's what they call otherwise engaged: and after to-night I couldn't have any one else. Peter, old man, I give you a toast—'Professor Lapski, the Prince of Impersonators!'"

At this moment the door opened and Uncle Bob stealthily thrust in his head.

"Come on, Uncle Bob," cried Sir Richard, "you'll drink Lapski's health, I know. Now then both of you, musical honours!"

His two hearers responded gallantly to the appeal, and the Archdeacon, as he undressed, heard the sound of melody arise. "Wonderful spirits those young men have! Wonderful spirits!" he said to himself: "I only hope they won't disturb poor Mr. Walton!"

CHAPTER XIV

CONFESSIONS

And now I see with eye serene
The very pulse of the machine.

WORDSWORTH.

IT was a small party which met at breakfast the next morning: the Archdeacon and Mrs. Branson had left by the early train, and Professor Lapski did not appear: Sir Richard explained that the efforts of the night before had told on his strength, and that he was doubtful how soon he would feel equal to society.

"Now, Dick," said Lady Mary, "I simply must insist on knowing all about him! Where did you pick him up? And how did he manage all those wonderful things? My head's simply in a whirl, and I can't make up my mind whether he's the most wonderful man of modern times or simply a gigantic fraud. Naturally I lean to the latter idea—but then I can't account for half the things I saw—and I'm bound to say

that I did find myself quite getting to like him yesterday. I saw quite a lot of him while you were out shooting, and really he seemed so nice and human—quite a pathetic figure."

The other ladies joined their entreaties to hers: the absence of their respective parents allowed Miss Branson and Miss Montford to assert their personal wishes with greater emphasis than would have been the case before. Mr. Walton and Lord Ranby looked at Sir Richard.

"It's up to you, old man," said Peter; "I don't think it's fair to leave them in the dark."

Sir Richard hesitated. His promise to England tied his tongue, and he felt a certain delicacy in explaining to two young ladies the mystification to which their respective parents had been subjected.

"Well, I'm afraid I must confess," he began at last, "that Lapski's a bit of a fraud. That isn't to say that he isn't a great man too," he went on, "for that he is. But if I'm to make a clean breast of it, I must allow that he's no more a spiritualist medium than I am. I do hope you'll forgive me," he added, turning to Diana; "but I knew your mother was so keen on spooks and all those

things, and I was so fearfully anxious to get you down to stay here, that I told her I hoped to get a great medium to meet her, and pitched her no end of a yarn about this imaginary Lapski. A rotten thing to do, I know, but you see how it was. And of course at first I thought I should have just to say that he couldn't come, and face the music myself—and, after all, I should have got you down here, which was the main thing, but then it happened that I had a most awfully clever friend, a real white man if ever there was one, and I put it to him and he promised to see me through. And whatever you think of my share in the business, I'm sure you'll agree he did his part uncommon well. And now you see," he added, turning to Miss Branson, "why I wasn't very keen to talk about the Professor yesterday evening. I knew you'd got some suspicions, and I didn't like to ask you what they were. Of course I should have loved to tell you all about him, but it didn't seem quite fair somehow to rope you into a little conspiracy against your mother."

Miss Branson smiled her forgiveness: it appeared that Sir Richard had found other

subjects of conversation of at least equal interest.

"I noticed," she said, "that you didn't seem to want to talk about him much: whenever I said anything about the Professor or Mr. Walton you always managed to turn the subject."

"I had a rare lot of turning to do," admitted the baronet; "an eel wouldn't have been in it! You see Uncle Bob wasn't quite a safe topic either!"

"Yes, about Mr. Walton's sons?" asked Miss Montford; "how in the world did he manage that?"

"Well, I'm afraid I've got to do the apologising there," said the brewer; "you see Dick had asked my two boys down here to shoot—they're in the house somewhere now—but I'd managed to get tied up with your mother, Miss Diana, and she'd somehow formed the idea——"

"Oh come, Uncle Bob!" broke in Dick.

"Oh well, yes, I'd told her that I hadn't got any children. I can't explain why at the moment. And then I suppose it was *Dear Brutus* gave us the idea, but Lapski did all the working of it out, and the rest of us were just supers."

"You did that faint almost too well, Uncle Bob," said Lady Mary with a smile; "I know you nearly frightened me out of my life."

"My dear Alice," said Mr. Walton, genuinely distressed, "I am sorry! I ought to have thought of that. I wouldn't have worried you for the world, but I had to do what I was told. I didn't like the idea of fainting myself, but Lapski said I had to, and Dick promised to catch me, and, selfishly, I never thought of you."

Lady Mary blushed a little.

"Do you know," she said slowly, "as every one's confessing, I feel I ought to make my contribution! And I'm worse off than you, for it isn't only you I've got to apologise to, but almost more to Diana and Mary. It's all Dick's fault, as usual," she went on; "I'm bound to say that, or else it would sound quite too dreadful, but the awful fact is that I'm not Alice Howard at all!"

The two young ladies gave a shriek of surprise: Mr. Walton's coffee cup almost dropped from his hand.

"Oh, it isn't quite as bad as it might be," she continued hurriedly, "for after all I *am* a relation of yours, though not the one you thought. I'm Mary Summers, and you

know my father and mother quite well, and you've seen me several times, though you wouldn't remember it. You see, Diana," she added, turning to that young lady, "poor Dick telephoned to me in a dreadful state because Alice Howard had to throw him over at the last moment, and he knew he couldn't get your mother and you here if there wasn't some one to be hostess, and as I've always been thought to be like her it seemed a simple and harmless plan. Of course I ought never to have done it, and I'm sure I shouldn't have done it if I'd known all it was going to mean. I've had some terrible moments," she added with a little shudder of recollection.

Mr. Walton was thinking deeply.

"Then perhaps that explains," he began—"but no, I don't see how it does. What *is* the explanation of that story about the divorce and the drunken nurse and George Howard? Dick promised to clear it up, but he never has."

Lady Mary blushed again. "That was just the worst of it," she said; "you see, Diana, your mother got it into her head that I was George's second wife——"

"Oh come, Mary!" said Sir Richard.

"Well, all right, yes, I told her I was. I

know it sounds stupid," she went on still more hurriedly, "but somehow I felt I had to. And then I had to account for what had become of her, and like an idiot I said she'd run away from him. But I don't know who the drunken nurse was; I know I never said anything about her."

Mr. Walton whistled.

"Well, I'm glad it's no worse," he said; "upon my word, there doesn't seem to be much to choose between us."

Miss Montford had also been doing some thinking on her own account. "So that's why you called me Mary!" she cried, turning to Sir Richard. "I couldn't imagine why you were so affectionate all of a sudden and took me off to the stables. I thought there must be something funny about it, when we got there and only found the garden pony at home."

It was Sir Richard's turn to exhibit some confusion.

"You little knew what you were saving me from at the moment," he answered; "I'm bound to say I'm surprised I stopped at calling you Mary. I might have gone to almost any length in my gratitude."

"It's enough to make one's head go round," said Miss Montford; "when Lord

Ranby told me last night who he was, I thought that was bad enough, but I never thought that all the rest of you were in disguise as well! I've got a little confession to make too, though it's not quite as bad as the rest: I think what Lord Ranby said must have made me a little suspicious, and I got it into my head somehow that Mr. Walton wasn't really an Indian Civilian, and when father asked him all those questions about India I had an idea he was going to break down. But of course, when he answered him so clearly I saw what a stupid mistake I'd made. You *will* forgive me, won't you?" she went on, turning to Mr. Walton with a charming smile.

The brewer showed signs of embarrassment.

"Oh, I'm sure Mr. Walton will forgive you," said Lord Ranby: "say no more about it, Miss Montford! If you doubt his facts again he'll make you read up all about Masulipatam in an Encyclopædia."

"*You've* got a brother still to account for, Ranby," said Mr. Walton, chuckling: "it's no good your pretending to be the only virtuous member of the party."

"Oh, poor old Paul," said his brother

airily, "he's all right! he had a jolly easy part to play last night, and if I'm not mistaken he's making a very hearty breakfast in the housekeeper's room at this moment with Lapski and the others."

"But that reminds me, Dick," said Lady Mary, "you've never answered my original question—*Who* is Professor Lapski?"

It required, as may have been gathered, an unusual combination of circumstances to reduce the baronet to silence, but for once he did not see what answer he could decently give.

"The fact is," he said at last, "my friend made me swear I wouldn't give him away to you, Mary. I don't know why he made such a point of it," he added mendaciously, "but he said I might tell Peter and Mr. Walton, but wasn't on any account to tell you, and I can't let him down after he's played up so nobly to me. You don't think I can, do you, Peter?"

Lord Ranby nodded agreement. The problem seemed insoluble. It was Mr. Walton who provided a solution. "I quite see that *you* can't say anything more, Dick," he said; "but I'm not bound by any such promise. Besides I should rather like to see my boys,

after that fleeting glimpse I had of them last night. If you'll come with me, Alice—I beg your pardon, Mary!—to the housekeeper's room, I think I can satisfy your curiosity."

Lady Mary accepted the invitation with alacrity; she and Mr. Walton left the room together. Lord Ranby and Miss Montford strolled out through the window into the garden, and Sir Richard and Diana were left alone.

"I do hope you'll forgive me, Miss Diana," he said earnestly: "you see it all happened because I was so fearfully anxious to get you down here, and I don't mind saying it's been worth it to me! you do know that, don't you?"

Miss Branson did not answer, but the smile in her eyes emboldened the baronet to approach. "Diana!" he cried. . . . The nature of the ensuing conversation may be gathered from the remark with which Sir Richard brought it to a close a quarter of an hour later.

"Now what do you say," he said, "to strolling down into the village and sending a wire to your mother? She'll be getting up to town in an hour or two, and I should hate her not to find the good news awaiting her.

She might begin to think old Lapski was a fraud!"

Mr. Walton, meanwhile, guided Lady Mary to the housekeeper's room: he paused at the door. "I think we shall find them all here," he remarked, as he gently opened it.

Four young gentlemen were sitting round the table, having obviously just finished breakfast: one who sat with his back to the door was apparently reading portions of the *Times* aloud.

"I missed the paper yesterday," he remarked gloomily. "Just my luck! there seems to have been a rare good finish at the Oval! Can any of you tell me what happened?"

He paused for an answer. As none came, he looked up and was amazed to see his three companions in the act of beating a stealthy retreat through the window.

"What's up?" he exclaimed, and he turned towards the door.

"Mary," said Mr. Walton, "I want to present to you the hero of last night's performance to whom we all owe so much—Captain England—Lady Mary Summers—Oh, you know one another already?" for Lady Mary had advanced and was warmly

shaking the hand of the discomfited Captain.

"Oh yes," she said, "Captain England and I are old acquaintances—I think I may say friends, after last night? for we *were* on the same side, weren't we, though I didn't know it? It was rather cruel of you, though, to insist on keeping me in the dark."

The Captain flushed deeply and his hand went to caress his non-existent moustache: its absence reminded him of his disguise, and he turned a still duskier red.

"I'm awfully sorry," he stammered; "you know it was all Dick's fault."

"Of course it was," said Lady Mary, "but it would have been too bad if I hadn't had a chance of thanking you. And I'm told you came to the rescue of my reputation in the farmhouse garden yesterday, when Mr. Walton was just going to denounce me as a liar—so I've got a private debt of gratitude as well!"

Captain England was regaining confidence. "Oh, that wasn't much," he said "but I can't expect you to forgive me for giving you that fright at dinner."

"Oh, that was no more than I deserved," said Lady Mary, laughing; "but now I want you to tell me all about last night's perform-

ance. There are still some things I can't quite understand."

"I'll leave you in the Professor's hands," said Mr. Walton; "if any one can explain what's been happening for the last two days, I'm sure he's the man to do it."

"Come along, Captain England," said Lady Mary, "let's walk in the garden while you tell your wondrous tale: it must be a relief to you to be able to walk about like a free man again."

"There's not much to tell," said Captain England, "but I'll do my best."

He accompanied her into the garden. Despite his disclaimers, the tale took some time in the telling, for it was not till nearly an hour later that Lady Mary encountered Sir Richard and Diana on their way back from the Post Office. The news they had to tell was no surprise to her, and she welcomed Diana warmly as a member of the family.

"I've been having a thrilling time with Captain England," she said, after that subject had been temporarily exhausted; "he's been telling me all that happened, and I do think he was quite wonderful. And do you know, I think he's ever so much handsomer without that horrid moustache!"

Another council of war had to be held, though one less anxious than that of the evening before. It was agreed that the house party must break up. Dick and Diana decided to go to town as soon as possible to seek Mrs. Branson's blessing, and Lady Mary made up her mind to travel with them to London. A pressing wire from Lord Ranby to the Archdeacon informed him that he was taking Miss Montford to her mother, and hoped that it would be possible for him to meet them there. Paul, whose business with his brother had proved trifling though urgent, was persuaded to stay for a day or two's sport ("a jolly lot better luck than you deserve," said Peter, "after giving us all such a fright"), and Mr. Walton and his two sons completed the number of the shooters. England refused to join them. "We've had two days off that old election," he said, "and Dick doesn't look like doing much business for the next day or two. I shall have to try and pacify his agent somehow, and it looks as if I should have to represent him on a good many platforms."

"There's no one I'd rather have to represent me, Smiler," said the baronet heartily. "Look here, old man, I'll tell Wilson to

look out some old clothes of mine and you might really do the thing in style. I can't help being sorry now you took off that moustache—not that it ever was much of an affair—but I expect you could get one made," he ended with a note of hope in his voice.

"I think *not*," said his friend with some emphasis. "I've had enough of play-acting for a bit, and if you can't get into Parliament without my wearing out your old suits you'll jolly well better stay a member of the public!"

CHAPTER XV

THE BREWER AT THE BREAKFAST TABLE

Praised be all liars and all lies!

BYRON.

"OH, Bob," said Mrs. Walton, rather more than a fortnight later, "I've had such a charming letter from Alice Howard pressing us both to go down there for a few days' shooting. I do hope you can manage it; let me read you what she says:

"DEAR AUNT ELIZABETH—George and I do so hope that you and Uncle Bob can come to us for a few days' shooting before the end of the month. It's *dreadful* to think that I haven't seen him since I was married, and of course George says it's all my fault!

"I was dreadfully disappointed not to be able to go to Drayworth to keep house for Dick, for of course I should have seen Uncle Bob there, but Evelyn's illness made it quite out of the question—he has got over the measles wonderfully, and you need have no fear of infection.

I'm afraid Dick had to have a bachelor party and couldn't entertain his young lady as he had intended—however, he seems to have found the opportunity elsewhere! Isn't his engagement too exciting?

"That reminds me. I've had the most extraordinary letter from Mrs. Branson: she must be a most remarkable lady!"

"She is that," observed Mr. Walton, with feeling.

"But you haven't met her, have you, Bob?" inquired his wife. "I thought they said she had to go back to America directly after the engagement was announced?"

"No, no, of course I haven't met her myself," answered Mr. Walton, getting a little red; "but I heard a lot about her at Drayworth. They'd been expecting her there, you know, and naturally we talked about her a good deal."

"Let me see, where had I got to?" resumed his wife. "Oh yes—

"remarkable lady! She wrote as if she'd known me all her life and said I was to be sure and give her love to Evelyn—*both of them*, she added! What can she mean? I can't help wondering if she is a little off her head. I had heard she was very eccentric, but what can she mean by saying

that she 'always thinks of me as a pattern of Selfless Motherhood,' and that she 'cannot be too thankful that that poor Mr. Howard is in the care of a True Woman'? Isn't it too odd? I must show you the letter when you come. For you really *must* make Uncle Bob come this time or I shall begin to think he wants to cast off his nieces! Do write and suggest a date. Much love from your aff. niece. ALICE HOWARD.

"*P.S.*—Did you see the announcement of Lord Ranby's engagement? He is such a friend of Dick's and he hasn't lost much time in following his example!"

"Didn't you say he was one of your party at Drayworth, Bob?"

"Yes, he was there," said Mr. Walton, "and his future father-in-law too, the Archdeacon, you know," he went on, after a pause devoted to exploring the thickness of the ice.

"Oh yes, isn't he the man there was all that fuss about in the papers the other day? I believe I was reading something about him in *The Church and the World* only just now."

Mrs. Walton sought for a moment and then passed a paper over to her husband pointing to a paragraph headed "Heresy in High Places." Mr. Walton took it and read—

Archdeacon Montford, whose daughter's en-

gagement to Lord Ranby is just announced, has been brought prominently before the religious public of late in a very different capacity. The Archdeacon has recently become a convert to spiritualism, and an address of his last week to some of his clergy has caused something of a flutter in the episcopal dovecotes. We understand that the Venerable gentleman claims to have assisted at a *seance* where communication was indubitably established with the Other World, and that he hotly denounced the prevalent scepticism on the subject in high quarters of the Church. We shall look with interest to see the line taken by his diocesan, whose proverbial breadth of mind will be subjected to a severe strain. Canon Dawkins, whose letter we publish in another column, ridicules the claim in his own inimitable vein of humour, and the long-standing friendship between the two (to which he refers) lends an element of piquancy to the situation. The Archdeacon was formerly a master at Eton: in fact, we have reason to believe that the engagement now announced is the outcome of a childish flirtation in the famous Eton playing-grounds. We have often pointed out that clerical schoolmasters, with their didactic tendencies and their complete ignorance of the parochial life of the Church . . .

The paper dropped from Mr. Walton's hands, and he gazed absently before him.

Half-forgotten sights and sounds floated through his brain: he saw once more that darkened room: the face at the window, the figures on the lawn: he felt once more the sustaining arm of Sir Richard, and the sharp sting of the soda water on his face: he heard again the high-pitched voice of Mrs. Branson and the broken accents of Professor Lapski. "Poor old England!" he muttered half aloud, and with a little smile on his lips.

"My dear Bob, what is the matter?" cried his wife; "aren't you feeling well? your eyes look perfectly glassy!"

The brewer pulled himself together with a start.

"Oh, I'm all right," he said, "I was only thinking——"

"But what were you thinking about?" asked Mrs. Walton; "you muttered something about England just now."

It is to be feared that Mr. Walton had learnt guile from earlier experiences, for it was without a tremor that he answered:

"My dear Elizabeth, I was only just saying to myself what can England be coming to when we have such trashy papers as this passing themselves off as religious! There's this one running the World for all it's worth,

and you know I've always thought that another of your favourites was edited by the Devil in person! You'll have one started in the interests of the Flesh next, I shouldn't wonder!"

He laughed at his own joke, and then, fearing that he had perhaps carried the jest a little too far, he added, "And it isn't even accurate in its worldly news: Ranby was at Winchester, not at Eton."

At another moment Mrs. Walton would have been ready to take up the challenge, but she had been a little disturbed at her husband's appearance, and the violence of his outburst had only partially reassured her.

"Oh, I know your views, my dear," she said amicably; "but you can't deny that Mrs. Brown came to us through the *Church Times*, and you know she's the best cook we ever had; so you'll allow there is some good in Church papers after all! But I see you've got a letter from Arthur there: I wonder if he says where his new district is: I wish you'd see; I know he expected to hear any time now."

"You open it and see, my dear," said Mr. Walton, tossing over the letter: "your

paper's taken up so much of my time that my egg's getting cold."

Mrs. Walton looked curiously at the foreign envelope: "I can't make out the postmark," she said, turning it round in her fingers. "There's an M and an S, and it seems to end in AM, but I can't read the rest of it."

"Masulipatam!" cried Mr. Walton loudly.

"Oh, how clever of you, Bob! I do believe it is! Yes, that's right, but how did you know?"

Mr. Walton was a trifle flushed. "Oh, well," he said, "it's a pretty well-known place, you know: I've often heard it spoken of."

"I must get a map and look it out," said his wife, rising from the table.

"No, no," said Mr. Walton, feeling that this was more than he could bear; "it is on the coast—in the north of Madras, you know—bounded on the South-West by the river Kistnah. Fancy your not knowing that! why, it's a thing every schoolboy knows," he added shamelessly and with a certain enjoyment. "I used to be able to simply reel off facts about it—let me see, Area 5000 square miles: population (if I remember right) ap-

proximately 520,866; chief commercial crops —chay-root, indigo, tobacco, and cotton."

Mrs. Walton, though impressed by her husband's erudition, was not paying him very close attention. "Fancy your remembering all that!" she said, her eyes on the letter which she had opened; "yes, that's it, he's just gone there: he says the people seem a very well-behaved class."

Mr. Walton, pleased with his own powers of memory, had grown incautious. "Bang, Bang!" he murmured rapturously to himself.

"*What* did you say, Bob?" asked his wife, looking at him curiously again.

Was this the innocent brewer of little more than a fortnight ago? Was this the brow that had blushed to deceive Mr. Ranby in the train, this the brain that had boggled at a little innocent deception to assist his nephew?

"I beg your pardon, my dear," he said shamelessly, "I was thinking how I should enjoy some shooting in Norfolk," and he playfully adjusted his fork at an imaginary partridge. "Bang, bang," he repeated, "with a different intention," as his wife's new allies might have said.

"I think you might take a little more interest in Arthur's movements," said his

wife, a trifle huffily; "but I'm glad you think we can manage to go to Norfolk: then should I write and suggest a day to Alice?"

"By all means, by all means," said Mr. Walton. "I shall enjoy seeing Alice again, and poor little Evelyn too," he added with a chuckle.

"Why *poor* little Evelyn?" asked his wife.

"Oh, didn't you say he'd just been having the measles?" responded the shameless brewer.

Mr. Walton had risen from the table and was unfolding the paper, whistling cheerily as he did so.

"Hulloa!" he said; "that's splendid! Dick's got in all right for Drayworth: here's a full account of the declaration of the poll. Listen and I'll read it to you.

"DRAYWORTH ELECTION

"DECLARATION OF THE POLL

"The result of the poll was declared last night by the Mayor at Drayworth Town Hall. The figures were as follows:

Sir Richard Atherton, Bart., M.C., Coal. Anti-Waste	12,407
Thomas Harvey, Ind. Lib. . .	7,302
Majority	5,105

"The successful candidate (who was accompanied by his *fiancee*, Miss Diana Branson) proposed a vote of thanks to the Mayor. He said that no words of his were needed to emphasise the meaning of the figures which the Mayor had read. Drayworth has given the Wasters notice to quit (cheers). The election had been conducted in a most sporting spirit, and he was glad to think that it would leave no bitter feelings behind it (cheers). He could not help taking that opportunity of thanking all those who had worked for him so gallantly, and they would forgive him if he gave the first place to the young lady who stood at his side (loud applause). He must also give a special word of thanks to his friend and secretary, Captain England, who, in the unfortunate circumstances which had kept him occasionally away from the constituency (laughter), had so ably represented him on many platforms throughout the district. (Hear, hear.) He was the best man he knew in a tight place, and he hoped soon to find him occupation in a similar capacity elsewhere (loud laughter and applause). Mr. Harvey briefly seconded the vote of thanks, which was unanimously carried.

"We understand that the wedding of the new member has been fixed for an early date and will take place in Chicago."

"Good old Dick!" said Mr. Walton

warmly; "I'm delighted he's got in. Diana'll be pleased too."

"Who is that Captain England he talks so much about?" inquired his wife; "did you meet him while you were down at Drayworth?"

Mr. Walton meditated for a moment, taking cover behind the paper. "No," he said at last slowly, "no, I didn't meet England: he was away electioneering while I was in Shropshire. But I heard a lot about him, and from all I heard he must be a remarkable young man, a very remarkable young man!"

EPILOGUE

Our revels now are ended: these our actors . . .
Are melted into air, into thin air.

SHAKESPEARE.

N October 22nd Mrs. Branson and Captain England stood together in a Chicago drawing-room. Both showed signs of fatigue, but there was on both their countenances, even on that of the gloomy captain, an unmistakable air of satisfaction.

"Well, that was just a lovely wedding," said Mrs. Branson, sinking into a chair with a sigh; "it is beautiful to think of those two young things and the sweet and lovely life they'll lead in that very handsome house. I do wish more of Richard's family could have been here, but it's a long way, and there's more folk than poor dear Chetwode who have no fancy for sea travel. But they've written some sweet letters to Diana. There's a Lady Mary Summers, now, who seems to be some sort of cousin of his, who's sent her a darling little brooch and a letter too. Diana

wouldn't let me see it, but she said it was just too sweet. And Dick's Uncle Bob, too, who'd been some sort of great gun in India —we met him down at Drayworth—he wrote a most beautiful letter, saying he must look out some of his Indian treasures for her when she got over. And then there's Lord Ranby too—he's sent a picture, St. Paul's disappearing in a fog: he says it's symbolic, though I don't quite know what he means by that—but Richard was tickled to death and says he's going to send him a picture of St. Peter's coming out of the mist for *his* present. I think it's just too nice of him to remember, and he just going to be married to that sweet Miss Montford! And the Archdeacon too —he wrote saying he would never forget those days at Drayworth.

"But the thing that pleased me most of all, Captain England," went on the good lady, "was a real lovely loving-cup from the gentlemen we met at Drayworth. Not that I hold with loving-cups myself, but Dick's given me his solemn promise he'll never use it for anything but cider. I must have you see that!"

She rose and led the way into the next room. "Isn't it just too cunning?" she

said, displaying a fine old loving-cup which stood in the place of honour among the presents. "It's got an inscription on it too, I declare!" she went on. "I hadn't seen that before.

'Sept. 1–3. M. S. R. W. P. R.'

Well, if that isn't cute? but what does M. S. stand for? P. R., that's Lord Ranby, who pretended he was his brother Paul, you know, till the Archdeacon and Professor Lapski proved to him he wasn't anything of the kind. And R. W., that's Mr. Walton; but, who's M. S.? It can't be Mrs. Howard: and now I remember that I've not heard from her: who can it be?"

Captain England pulled himself together for a final effort. "I fancy," he said, "it must be the abbreviation of two Latin words *Memoriae sacrum*—sacred to the memory, you know: you often find it in old inscriptions."

"Well, what a thing it is to be a real scholar," said Mrs. Branson admiringly, as she replaced the cup; "and did they teach you all that at Eton?"

She led the way back to the drawing-room: "That'll be something to tell Lady Mary when I meet her at Christmas," thought the Captain; "but it was a near thing."

"Well, Mrs. Branson," he said aloud, "I'm afraid I must be going. I can't thank you enough for all your hospitality. And now I know you must want to get rid of me, for you'll be getting ready for your trip down South."

"Well, that's true enough," said Mrs. Branson; "say, Captain England, I suppose you never met a friend of Dick's called Professor Lapski? I met him at Drayworth and I've been trying all I know to get his address, but Dick says he's gone abroad and he can't find out where he is."

"I'm afraid not," said Captain England; "I've heard Dick speak of him, but I don't think I ever saw him. No, I'm sure we've never met."

"Well, I'm real sorry for that," said Mrs. Branson, "for I know you'd just love him. I can't help feeling you two would have a great deal in common."

The topic was a little dangerous, and England hastened his adieux. As he stepped on to that Boulevard which poor Mr. Branson had never accepted as a substitute for the Blue Mountains of his own Virginia, he paused to light a cigarette.

"Dear old lady," he said to himself,

"I'm afraid she'll get awfully bored with that fortnight's solitude! I almost wish I'd cut it down to a week. But I'm afraid she'll find it precious hard to get in touch with Lapski again!"

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